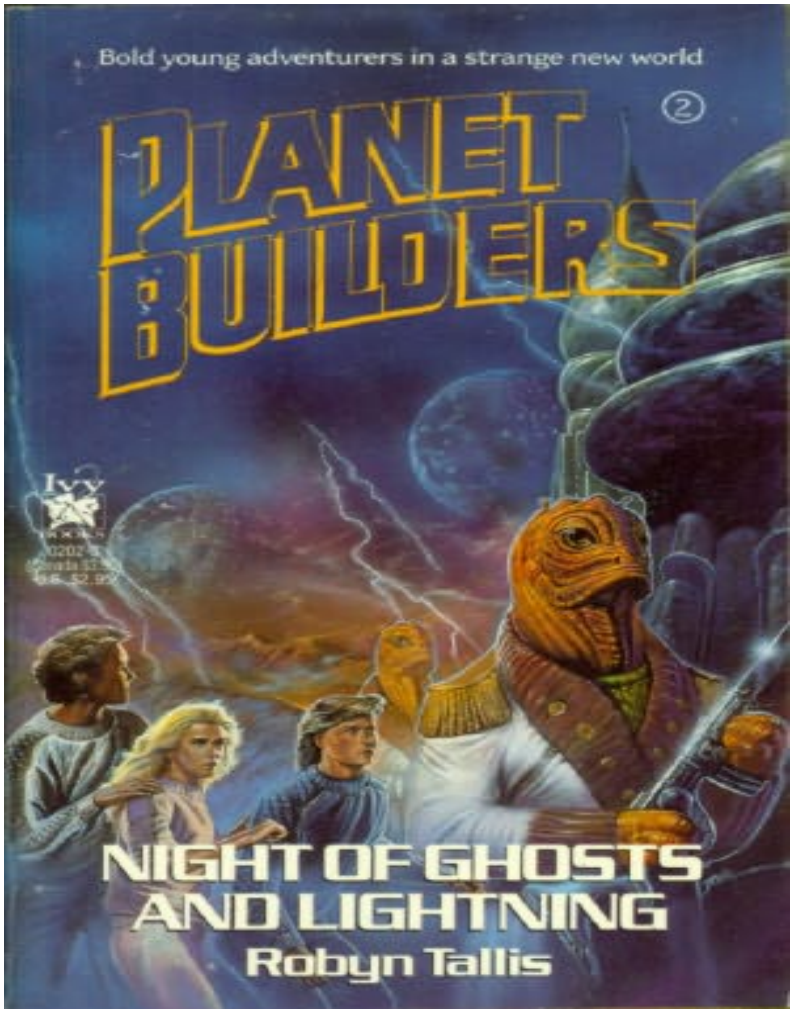


PLANET BUILDERS

Nights of Ghosts and Lightning

Robyn Tallis

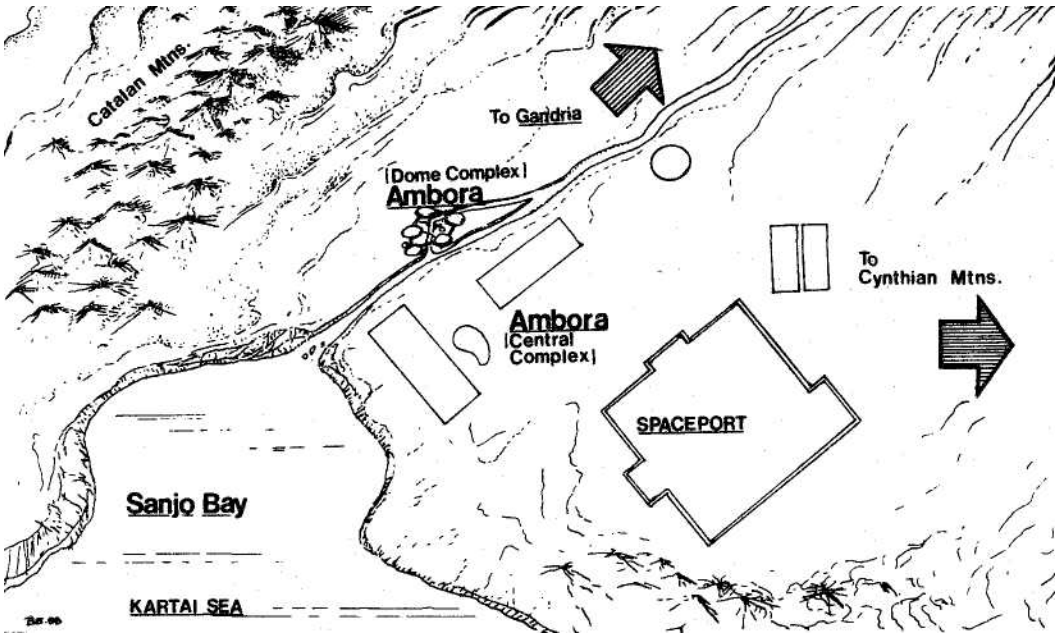
To: Catherine Juliana Doyle Macdonald for computer assistance

With thanks to Bruce Coville, Debra Doyle Jim Macdonald, and Sherwood Smith who built the planet.

IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK
Ivy Books
Published by Ballantine Books
Produced by Butterfield Press, Inc.
133 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10003
Copyright © 1988 by Butterfield Press, Inc.
All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.
All the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 88-91124
ISBN: 8041-0202-3
Manufactured in the United States
First Edition: January 1989

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen



CHAPTER ONE

Dating Games

"Early date tonight," said Sean Matthews, sliding his tray onto the table and sitting down opposite Zachary Yamoto.

So far, he and Zach were the only students in this part of the Bradbury School's cafeteria. Like most buildings on the newly colonized planet of Gauguin, the school had been designed to serve a much larger community. Right now, with scarcely three thousand residents, the colony's main settlement of Ambora looked more like a small town than a thriving spaceport, but the Planetary League had great hopes.

Zach's deeply tanned, pleasantly irregular face lit up with cheerful curiosity at his friend's announcement. "Clea again?"

Sean shook his head. "Not tonight. She's got late shift over at the Transport Section." Gauguin days and nights lasted several hours longer than

Old Earth's twenty-four; but a system of community service—known to the colony's young people without affection as "drudge"—filled up most of the extra time.

"So who's the lucky girl?" asked Zach.

Sean concentrated on breaking the seal on his vegetable juice without tearing the carton. "Philippa Bidding."

Zach raised an eyebrow. "The original Ice Maiden? I thought you had something special going with Clea."

"Nothing that special," said Sean.

He knew he sounded defensive—*be honest, Matthews,* he told himself. *You sound guilty. Because you* feel *guilty.* But his parents were administrators, transferred from colony to colony at regular intervals by the Planetary League, and Gauguin marked his fourth world since leaving Earth. He knew that getting too close to anybody—especially somebody as nice as Clea Tourni—could be painful. Besides, there was still something about Philippa that attracted him— probably the fact that she was incredibly beautiful.

"Better hope the lady agrees with you," observed Zach. "Because here she comes right now."

"Clea doesn't know about tonight, you toroid," muttered Sean. He pulled his portable terminal out from beneath his chair and punched up his class notes. By the time Clea took the seat next to

him, he presented—he hoped—the appearance of somebody engrossed in study.

"Hello, Sean," said Clea. "Ignoring me for ancient history again?"

Her voice was gentle and musical, and Sean looked up in spite of himself. A humorous glint in her topaz-colored eyes let him know she'd meant the remark to tease him. The last time he'd been Clea's study partner, he'd tried to split his attention equally between her and Old Earth's Napoleonic Wars. General Bonaparte had come out the loser.

Sean reddened. "I didn't finish the reading."

"Just the same," said another familiar voice, "I don't recommend you catch up now." Philippa Bidding, slim and poised, sat down on Sean's other side, and added, "Dr. Ives just walked in."

Caught between the two girls, Sean tried to hold his uneasiness in check. Clea Tourni had come to Gauguin from the planet Galahad, where second- and third-generation settlers had developed an empathic talent for sensing the emotions of those around them. *If she notices something's wrong . . . or if Philippa mentions having a date for tonight. . .*

Zach Yamoto, looking amused, took up the conversation before either girl could notice Sean's uncomfortable silence. "Old Laser Eyes doesn't believe in studying between classes. He thinks it's a sign of not enough after school."

Sean shoved his terminal back out of sight. All four students fell silent as the tall, balding

Director of the Bradbury School—followed by his always-frowning assistant, Ivan Santori— completed his tour of the cafeteria.

Talk resumed in the lunchroom as the two men left. More students came in, among them

the remaining members of Sean's own group, Arkady Davidov and Will Mornette. The two newcomers presented an interesting contrast: Arkady, stocky and muscular, a native of the heavy-gravity planet Theta, and Will, almost two meters tall and still growing, but with none of Arkady's strength, Acedium, Will's home planet, had a gravity less than one-third Earth normal, and just walking around on Gauguin exhausted him.

In spite of the differences, and occasional tensions, among the six students, they still made up the most close-knit group at Bradbury. Not all the closeness was voluntary; the six had barely known each other before they had been lost together in the Catalan Mountains. There they had found, or perhaps had been guided to find, a ruined city on a high plateau—evidence of the first nonhuman civilization the Planetary League had yet encountered.

A strange device in the ruins had shown the lost students visions of the city's downfall, and of the final days of its orange-eyed, reptilian people. Not long afterward, the six had barely escaped from an earthquake that wiped out the ruins as if they had never been. Returning to Ambora, they found their experiences dismissed as hallucina-

tions brought on by the stress of being lost in an unfamiliar environment.

Since then they had kept together in self-defense. Nobody else had been there; nobody else understood—although Sean, acutely aware of his current uneasy position between Clea and Philippa, couldn't help wondering just how well that closeness might hold up under pressure.

He was still wondering later that afternoon when he met Philippa Bidding at the entrance to Ambora's small holovid theater.

"Sorry it has to be the early show," he said. "But I have to be home tonight. My parents have a meeting."

"One of the perils of being the Governor's son," said Philippa—in sarcasm or sympathy, Sean couldn't tell which. Clea's dark, mobile features showed each changing mood, but Philippa always seemed to wear an exquisite, unreadable mask.

I've known her since I came here, thought Sean, *and I still don't know her at all.* He suppressed the uncomfortable reflection, and they went inside to take their seats.

The holovid theater was already full of people wearing the bulky helmets and gloves that provided the show's illusions of sight, sound, and touch. Home-use holovid machines only showed small three-dimensional images moving around inside a viewing tank, but theatrical versions could put the audience right into the action. Viewers could even choose between watching in

solo, group, or date mode—the last designed to

let two people be aware of both each other and

the ongoing story. Sean and Philippa set the controls at their seats

for date mode and put on the gloves and helmets. Soft music and a random color display came on at once, surrounding them both. Sean glanced over at Philippa, who smiled back as though she, too, were looking forward to the rest of the evening. The music changed, and the shifting colors solidified into the opening scene of the holovid—a musical comedy, but a good one. Almost against his will, Sean became absorbed in the unlikely adventures of the cast, and even found himself ready to forgive their habit of breaking into song at every opportunity. Soon, the improbable plot reached its halfway point— the villainous land developers had just received permission to pollute the little seaside village with tourist hotels and offshore oil wells—and the villagers trooped into the town square for another dance number.

The show's heroine opened her mouth and began to sing. As the music swelled a cold wind gusted through the town. Dead leaves whirled up and scudded past the dancing villagers, but nobody seemed to notice.

Sean looked over at Philippa again, but the blond girl had vanished. He frowned, wondering what was wrong. He could imagine Philippa switching over into solo mode for some reason of her own, but not without warning him first.

In the village, the wind was rising. Dust and trash blew down the narrow lanes. Suddenly, with a grinding crash, an armored vehicle smashed through one of the quaint thatched cottages. Stonework crumbled to powder under its treads.

Something's gone wrong, thought Sean. *This can't be part of the story!*

"Philippa!" he yelled over the music—the background orchestra was still playing full blast as the armored vehicle advanced. The dancers broke and ran, scattering through the streets. "Philippa! Where are you?"

Nobody answered, and he still couldn't see her. The armored vehicle ground on forward, coming to a halt in the cobblestoned square.

Only the holovid's heroine remained in place. Abruptly, the orchestra's happy music stopped in mid-note, and the singer seemed to notice the huge armored vehicle for the first time. She stared, and as she stared her features melted and changed, turning her honey-skinned, caramel-haired beauty into something inhuman, with orange eyes and a flat, lipless mouth.

Like the people we saw in the ruined city, Sean realized. *It's all starting again. ...*

He broke away from the sight, and ran down a footpath between two cottages. The houses, too, were changing as he passed—growing taller, dirtier, closer together. *Maybe something's wrong with the helmet,* he thought, *and it's making me see these things.*

He ran between walls of rough, sooty brick

until he reached the end of the alley. There he

paused. He knew, in his mind, that all this was

only illusion; but his sense of danger felt real

enough to make him check around the corner

before going out into the street.

He pulled his head back fast. Another of the armored vehicles was coming his way. It had a turret on the top, with a long, cannonlike tube jutting out from it. The end of the cannon was solid and polished-looking. *That's all wrong,* thought Sean. *The tube should have an opening somewhere. I've seen flatpix from the wars on Old Earth.*

The armored vehicle—tanks, that was what they called them—growled into a clumsy turn that smashed the bottom story of a corner building. The structure collapsed in a shower of bricks and dust. Through the rubble, Sean glimpsed the peaceful seaside village again, with dancers still twirling and swaying around the singing heroine. The musical scene looked sharp and clear, but unreal, like something observed through the wrong end of a telescope.

Out in the street, the tank swiveled its cannon to point directly at him. The polished end of the long tube glowed briefly with a pure blue light. Sean felt an intense, almost paralyzing pain strike him behind his eyes. His legs buckled under him, and he fell to his knees on the pavement.

That does it, he thought, as the agony faded.

I'm going to punch out right now. Something's really gone wrong here—these things aren't supposed to hurt.

He looked around for the shutoff switch. Among the students that Sean ran with, it was a matter of honor never to use the Toroid Button, as they called it. But this was different... .*So I'm atoroid. But this helmet might be giving out electric shocks or something.*

He couldn't find the switch anywhere in this scene. "Philippa!" he shouted, hoping that she could hear him. "Something's wrong—hit the button and get us out!" Then he ran back down the alley, searching for the patch of bright orange that marked the housing of a shutoff switch.

The Toroid Button has to be around here somewhere. Every scene in a holovid has to have one. It's the law, I think. And there it was, set into the wall of a burned-out building across the village square. Sean stayed put and checked up and down the street. Whatever the tank had done, he wasn't eager to encounter that effect again.

A long way off, a squad of troopers in dull green uniforms headed his way. Their figures seemed distorted, as if seen through running water, but he could tell that the proportions weren't human. In their hands they held sticklike objects that had to be weapons.

The troopers started trotting toward him in a loose formation. *I'd better hurry. They've spotted me.*

Sean dashed across the street, throwing him-

self against the smokestained wall of the building. He made a grab for the switch, scraping his knuckles on the orange housing before he found *the* catch. The housing swung open, and he positioned his finger over the button inside.

He glanced back down the street at the advancing troopers. *Too bad, guys, but I can't stay and play,* he thought. Then he pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

He pressed the Toroid Button again, still without result. By now, the leading troopers in the squad were getting close. Two of them knelt in the street and lifted their weapons.

Sean remembered the blue glow of the cannon, and the blinding pain. *I can't let them shoot me,* he thought. *Time to do something drastic.*

He raised his hands, running them up the sides of his neck. He knew the holovid helmet was there—it was what produced most of the illusions—but with simulation gloves on, he couldn't tell if he had touched it or not. *But if I grab where it should be,* he told himself, *and pull up ...*

The helmet came off. The illusory town vanished, taking with it the alien troopers and their uncanny weapons. He was back in the Ambora holovid theater, sitting beside Philippa in one of the big cushioned chairs. He was so glad to see her that he threw his arms around her and hugged her.

Philippa shrugged out of his embrace and

reached for her own shutoff switch. Sean watched her open the housing and push the button, then lift the holovid helmet to unleash her long, light hair. Helmet off, she gave him an irritated look. "What's the idea of punching out from date mode?"

Sean glanced down at his own shutoff switch. Its orange cover was still closed. / *never touched it, after all.* Baffled, he could only mutter, "My helmet was malfunctioning,"

"Well, it certainly ruined a perfectly good show," Philippa said. "We might as well go home."

CHAPTER TWO

The Data Net

Together, Sean and Philippa walked out into the plaza beside the holotheater. A hot, dry wind blew down off the inland mountains, ruffling the hair on the back of Sean's head. The east wind had been blowing without letup for a couple of days, parching the air and setting the colonists' nerves on edge.

The twin moons Justine and Juliette rode high in the evening sky, adding their mauve-tinged light to the glowglobes ringing the Education and Research domes. In the half-

light of Gauguin's long evening, the whites of Philippa's eyes had already begun to give off an eerie pale green glow. The bioluminescence, caused by an otherwise harmless parasite, marked her as a native of "Old Earth's firstborn daughter," the planet Alphorion.

"Here," said Sean, hoping to break her silence. "I'll walk you home."

"If you want to." She bent to scoop up a quufer that had been lying against the theater's outside wall. The long-haired, almost spherical animal snuggled into her arms, blushing bright orange with pleasure and making gentle *quuu-ing* noises. Sean watched, feeling snubbed.

A moment later, he heard Arkady Davidov's cheerful voice call out, "Sean, Philippa! Wait up!"

Sean looked around. On the far side of the plaza, Will and Arkady were crossing the bridge from the Research Dome—probably coming out of late-shift drudge. Clea Tourni was with them. "Just what I needed," Sean muttered.

Philippa gave him a sharp glance. "What's the matter? Ashamed to be seen with me?"

"No ... it's just... oh, forget it." He sighed. *It's just that somehow I don't think Clea's going to understand this at all.*

He was right, which didn't make him feel any better. As soon as the other three came up, Clea gave Philippa one quick look and then fixed Sean with an orange-hazel gaze as painful in its way as the blue light from the holovid cannon.

"I see you decided to take in the early show," Clea said. "You told me you couldn't go out tonight."

This is getting more corrosive by the minute, thought Sean. *Neither one of them's going to speak to me for a week.*

"I really couldn't—I mean can't," he said. "My

parents are going *to* some official bash, and they want me home before they leave. Studying."

Clea nodded. "I understand. Some things are more important than others. It's good to let people know where your priorities are."

Make that two weeks, decided Sean.

Arkady Davidov watched with the others as Sean and Philippa crossed the arched bridge over the Tati River, on their way to Ambora's residential section—side by side but not, he noted, hand in hand. He was still reaching for something neutral to comment on when Will said, "Too bad they got transferred to the early shift. Give me late shift any time."

"I'm with you on that," said Arkady. "Late shift gives you a chance to get the studying done before drudge. And then"—he waved an arm in a gesture designed for Theta's

heavier gravity, and ended up being more flamboyant than he'd intended—"and then it's party time!"

"Speaking of party time," said Will, "anybody have the ration credits for a snack?"

"I do," said Clea. She looked away from the bridge where Sean and Philippa had crossed to Admin Hill. "I'd been saving up, but it doesn't look like I'll have a better chance to spend them this cycle."

"'Use it or lose it,'" Arkady quoted as they started for the Greendomes Cafe. "Rotation's coming up again soon."

"That's right," Will said. "I'm going over to the

Construction detail. How about you guys?"

"Zach and I have the Energy Center," said Arkady.

"And the rest of us are in Transportation," said Clea. "How did you get Construction?"

"I put in for it," Will replied.

Arkady looked up at his lanky companion and shook his head. "You actually asked for the chance to spend all your drudge-time breathing silanna dust? Amazing."

"Not really," said Will. "If I'm going to adjust to a planet with three times the gravity anyone needs, I'll have to start doing something physical. So when the Planning Committee put out a Category A High-Pri call for 'Operators comma Materials comma Building'—there I was."

"Hrarn," said Arkady. They took seats under the striped awning of the Greendomes Cafe, and he continued, "Simultaneous buildups in transportation, energy, and housing—I do believe that a new wave of immigration is about to break upon us."

Along with the other members of the colony administration, Philippa's parents lived overlooking the Kartai Sea. The Matthews family lived nearby, a little uphill, in quarters only slightly larger.

Like most buildings in Ambora, the homes of the colonists were made of silanna, a silicon-based substance that could be "grown" over a wire framework in shapes to suit any purpose.

The houses were similar in design—one-family structures with a central living dome surrounded by smaller attached units for sleep and work—but size, color, and layout varied enough to keep the neighborhood from looking dull.

Sean walked with Philippa up the path to her front door. As they stood together in the light of the entry glowglobe, Sean wondered if something was wrong besides a quick hug and an interrupted holoshow. She hadn't said anything beyond "yes" and "no" since they'd left the others back in the plaza.

He made a final effort to mend the situation. "Good night, Philippa. I'm sorry about the

show."

It didn't work. Philippa was still cuddling the quufer she'd picked up outside the holotheater; she shifted the long-haired orange puff ball of a creature to the crook of her left arm and reached out to press the lock-plate. The door slid open, and Philippa stepped inside.

"Good night," she said as the door shut behind her. Sean stood for a moment looking at the blank panel, then made his way up Admin Hill to his own house.

He was greeted in the central living space by his mother. Alison Matthews had already changed out of the loose, practical clothes she preferred for her regular work as the colony's chief architect. Instead, she was wearing one of the Vespenian silk suits she kept for her unofficial, but very real, second job as "spouse of the governor."

"Aren't you home a bit early?" she asked. "I didn't think we'd see you until we walked out the door."

"The show wasn't very good," said Sean. "Some kind of helmet malfunction, I think."

"Oh, dear. That theater's important for colony morale. You'll have to file a report with Ms. Tereriff tomorrow."

"I know, Mom, I know," said Sean. As usual, being told to do something he'd already planned to take care of made him feel about five years old. He decided to change the subject. "Where are you and Dad going tonight?"

Harold Matthews entered the central space as Sean spoke. "The Planning Committee has a working dinner scheduled," the governor said, fastening his shirt cuffs. "And they expect us to attend. How did your date go with Miss Tourni?"

"Clea's got late shift this cycle. I went with Philippa."

"The Bidding girl?"

Sean nodded.

A faint line appeared between the governor's eyebrows. "I think you ought to see a little less of that particular young lady," he said in his no-arguments voice. "Besides, I thought Clea was your latest girlfriend."

"After she saw me with Philippa tonight, she might not be," Sean replied with some feeling. "Besides, what's the matter with Philippa? She's my age, we're in the same class, her parents work with you, and we have the same drudge."

"I wish you wouldn't talk about voluntary community service like that," said Mr. Matthews. "It sets a bad example for the rest of the students." Mr. Matthews pulled on his jacket and checked his chronometer. "It's time we were going, Alison."

Mrs. Matthews picked up her handbag and gave Sean a quick kiss on the cheek. "I've instructed the loco to make sure you get a good dinner—you'd live on snacks from the

Greendomes outlet if somebody didn't remind you to stop and eat a proper meal sometimes. Do your studying and get to bed early. We'll be back by midnight."

She toggled open the door and walked with her husband down the path to the Matthews family hovercar. The vehicle sped silently away, and Sean shut the door again.

"'I wish you wouldn't talk about community service like that,'" grumbled Sean, as he made his away back into the kitchen. "'I think you ought to see a little less of that young lady'—don't I get a say in anything myself anymore?"

"Good evening, Sean," came the synthesized voice of the family IN LOCO PARENTIS (INtegrated LOcal COntroI PARENTal Information System) robot.

"Hi, Loco," Sean replied. Being grouchy around a robot never helped anything—they didn't even notice it. "What are you programmed for tonight?"

Lights blinked on the robot's front panel. "To

make sure you eat, then go to your room and study, and then go to sleep before midnight."

"The usual stuff," said Sean. "Well, what's for dinner?"

Two hours later, his studying still only half finished, Sean sat at the desk in his room. His terminal was open to his ancient-history class-notes file, but his mind kept coming back to the conversation with his parents.

Dad's been checking on my friends, he realized.

And then Philippa's voice, sharp and—now that he thought about it—hurt at the same time, seemed to echo in his head: "What's the matter? Ashamed to be seen with me?"

vis *if she thought I ought to be,* he realized. *As if there really were something... but that's ridiculous.*

Still, there had been that worry line between his father's brows. And Harold Matthews wasn't normally the sort to interfere in his son's social life. *He knows there's something,* Sean thought. *Well, if Dad can check, I can check.*

He scowled at the little study terminal. It wouldn't do, he knew that. The study terminals had access only to limited areas of the colony's main computer system. But the governor had to be able to retrieve any piece of information in Gauguin's data net instantly.

/ have to get into Dad's study and use his terminal. And to get in there, I have to get past the loco. Sean pushed back his chair. "The robot hasn't

been *uncrated* that can't be decoyed or repro-grammed," he said under his breath.

"Loco," he called in a louder voice, "could you come here for a minute?"

A little later, Sean slipped out of his darkened room and across the central space to his father's study. Toggling the door shut behind him, he sat down in the chair by the desk

and brought the big terminal on line.

For a moment, he just sat there in the faint amber glow from the screen display. He hadn't brought up any of the other lights for fear of clueing in the loco. The robot was still on the alert, somewhere in the house—he hadn't dared to turn off its sensors and reset its internal clock to cover the gap for more than a couple of minutes.

Sean had come this far, but he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that what he was doing was wrong. For as long as he could remember, on four previous planets, his father's private office had always been off limits. This was the first time he'd considered breaking that unspoken rule. Then again, this was the first time his father had checked up on his friends.

The first time that he knew about.

The thought brought him up short. He'd always trusted his parents, and it gave him a cold, unpleasant feeling to think that maybe he couldn't trust them after all.

Sean's mouth tightened, and he returned to the terminal keyboard. *All right. Let's see what Miss*

Bidding has in her file that makes her an unsuitable date for the governors son.

The keys clicked gently as he entered his command. SEARCH ON PERSONNEL GAUGUIN.

SEARCH READY, the terminal responded. INPUT PARAMETERS.

Let's do a test run first. See what it has on me.

Once again he bent over the keyboard. SEARCH ON SEAN <AND> MATTHEWS <AND> EARTH.

The cursor blinked and the information poured out. There wasn't much.

SEAN MATTHEWS, AGE 16. SON OF HAROLD AND ALISON MATTHEWS. CURRENTLY COHORT 3 TRANSITION SECTOR BRADBURY SCHOOL. NO SIBLINGS. BORN EARTH, LIVED 3.2 YEARS EACH ON CASPIAN, TIEFF, AND VESPEN. NO FURTHER INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS DATABASE.

Sean sat back in the chair and contemplated the embarrassingly short data dump. *That's all?It makes me look like nothing. There's more meat in the school yearbook.*

He cleared the screen and tried again. SEARCH ON PHILIPPA <AND> BIDDING <AND> ALPHORION.

A moment later he was shaking his head in dis-

ALL INFORMATION ON THIS SUBJECT RESTRICTED, read the screen display. INFORMATION AVAILABLE ON A HIGHER

LEVEL *OF THIS* DATABASE. DO YOU WISH TO *ACCESS A HIGHER* LEVEL?

ENTER YOUR *ACCESS CODE.*

So there really is *something,* he thought. *But what?*

He wasn't sure he wanted to find out, even if he could somehow manage to work his way into the higher levels of the net. What he'd done already was bad enough—like sneaking around in Philippa's bedroom or reading her diary. He reached out to press the "Clear Screen" key.

As he touched it he heard sounds coming from the main part of the house: the front door sliding open, and then the voices of his parents.

Oh, no, he thought. His room was all the way across the central space from his father's study. *I'll never be able to get back to my room before they see me.*

CHAPTER THREE

Down by the Waterside

Inside the Bidding house, Philippa hesitated a moment by the door as the panel slid shut behind her. She'd treated Sean Matthews badly, and she knew it.

First you spend weeks hoping he'll ask you out—and then you freeze him. Miss Bidding, you are a mess.

Biting her lip, she fought back the impulse to run up the hill after Sean and see if she could salvage at least part of the evening. But trying to make things better never helped; she ought to have learned that by now. She lowered the quu-fer to the carpeted floor and went on into the central space.

The interior of the Biddings' dome was brightly lighted, but that didn't mean anything: all the colony dwelling units turned up the power in welcome-home mode whenever anybody came in. As Philippa made her way toward the kitchen she got the impression that she was alone in the house.

Fine, she thought, bringing up the kitchen lights with a touch on the wallplate. *I'm not good company tonight anyway.*

She cycled the menu processor to see what was available on the monthly ration allowance. The family loco floated up silently beside her as she scanned the possibilities.

"Good evening, dear Philippa. Did you have a pleasant time? Your parents have gone to a meeting. They told me to remind you that you have a research project due in two days."

"I know, I know." Philippa punched the key-pattern for a fruit and protein combination. "Leave me alone."

The loco moved away and hovered at a discreet distance. Philippa ignored the robot and waited for her dinner. When the red "working" light on the preparator blinked off, she pulled out the plate and carried it back across the central space to her room.

As she did so she saw on the wall the flatpic portrait of her as a child, done by hand in paint on canvas. The twilight sky of Alphorion filled most of the background, and the artist's skill had captured the delicate luminescence of young eyes barely starting to glow. She'd been six when the picture was painted— already tall for her age, but well-dressed and well-behaved and a credit to her upbringing.

Sudden tears blurred her sight of the picture; she ducked her head and blinked them back. *They hung it there just to remind me,* she thought, and hurried past the painting into her own room. Unnoticed, the quufer she had carried in her arms scuttled after her on its stubby legs.

The group at the Greendomes Cafe broke up early, leaving Arkady alone in the plaza. Clea had gone home to join her family at dinner, and Will Mornette always kept early hours.

Even though Will towered over almost everyone in Ambora he lacked strength and tired easily. In a way, Arkady could sympathize. His own weight on Gauguin came to only half of what he considered normal, and he, too, had gone through the embarrassment of having the reflexes of a lifetime suddenly become useless.

Don't kid yourself, Arkady thought. *You had it easy by comparison.*

Even while Arkady was missing whatever he aimed at and dropping small objects, he'd still been able to run faster, jump higher, and lift more weight than anyone on Gauguin except his father. Now, feeling slightly ashamed of his moment of unearned self-pity, he pushed his chair away from the cafe table and started for home.

The hour was mid-gloaming, halfway through the first evening shift. The twin moons bathed the bridges and walkways of Ambora in a pale,

if the letters were large, but dim enough that everything had a grayed-down, melancholy look. Here and there along the paths, glowglobes on poles threw out yellow circles against the twilight, usually marking steps or slopes that might otherwise be missed in the shadows. Power on Gauguin wasn't plentiful enough to waste on non-essentials.

Ahead on the walkway, Arkady saw Zach Yamoto's wiry figure approaching, with the smaller brown-and-white shape of a theskie by his side. The theskie's pointed reptilian head only came up to Zach's chest, but the creature kept pace easily, striding along on muscular hind legs.

"That you, Arkady?" Zach called.

"Me and nobody else," Arkady replied. "Aren't you heading in the wrong direction for this time of day?"

"My folks aren't home until after late shift," said Zach, coming into speaking distance. "There's a meeting."

Arkady nodded. "I know. Sean said his parents were scheduled for something or other official, too."

"Same thing," said Zach. "Planning Committee. The Energy people are all having fun getting last-minute printouts of the solar-grid expansions."

The theskie turned its head to look from Zach to Arkady. "Fun," it said in a harsh, strident voice. "Fun sun some none under blunder thunder wonder. Fun?"

Zach scratched the loose, featherlike scales at the base of the theskie's skull. "That's right, Admiral. Fun. Anyhow, Arkady, you'd have enjoyed the session. I hear you're working in Energy next cycle."

"Probably helping put up new solar grids in the panel field," said Arkady, "if they've got an expansion planned."

"Maybe not," said Zach. "Energy's got a bunch of hot new ideas they're going to be pushing at the meeting tonight. I think it makes them nervous to have us so dependent on the gridfields for power."

"What kind of hot ideas?" Arkady asked.

"All sorts of stuff," said Zach. "A pilot hydroelectric plant up in the mountains, a tidal-power generator down on Sanjo Bay—that one sounded interesting, and I decided I had time between now and endshift to wander down and look the place over. Want to come?"

"Sure, why not? Let's go."

The theskie loped along beside them as they made their way out of town and down to the bay. Soon they stood on a point of rock overlooking the Kartai Sea. Here, palisade cliffs towered more than sixty meters above the black sand beaches.

Arkady looked over the edge of the sheer drop and shook his head. "That's a long way down."

Zach had been gazing out at the smooth expanse of black sand that sloped from the cliff down to the water's edge. The hot wind off the mountains blew his shoulder-length brown hair

forward past his face, hiding his expression. "It surely is, but this is low tide. A few hours from now you could stand here and get your face wet with the spray."

Arkady looked at the wide beach with respect. Far below, the phosphorescent waves came out of the southwest in a stately procession, broke with a perfect curl, and then drew back into the sea.

After a while Zach spoke again. "Do you know what I'd like to do?"

"No, what?"

Zach turned, and Arkady saw that his friend's brown eyes were dancing with an adventurous light. "I'd like to go swimming down there."

Arkady looked at Zach with dismay. "Without anything between you and the water? Do you know what you are?"

"No," said Zach. "What am I?"

"You're crazy, that's what. Human beings are not meant to enter bodies of water bigger than they are."

Zach laughed. "That's what comes of living on a frontier world. Back on Earth, where I come from, people go swimming in the ocean all the time."

Arkady crossed his arms on his chest and shook his head. "Sure they do."

"They used to, anyway," said Zach, "in the old days before the pollution got too bad."

"You're talking about the days back before

starships were even invented," Arkady pointed out. "That's a long time ago."

"Well... yes," admitted Zach. "But people still swim indoors, in pools and things; I've done some of that myself. Now we've got a real, unpolluted ocean right here in front of us. How about it?"

Arkady gave the bay another dubious glance. "Couldn't you wait until they get a pool built?"

In the short time they had been standing there, the tide had risen significantly. The waves were breaking against the base of the cliffs. Within hours, Arkady realized, the waves would be breaking forty meters higher. He looked back at his friend. The waves and tides of Sanjo Bay were unfamiliar and somewhat disturbing, but as usual Zach's enthusiasm for a new idea was proving contagious.

"All right," Arkady conceded. "If you can find one other person, just one, who'll go along with a dumb plan like that, then you can count me in, too."

"You're on," said Zach. "We've seen enough for tonight, I think. Let's head back."

They strolled away from the cliffs and into town. Before they'd gone out of sight of the beach, Zach was already deep in plans for their conquest of the waves.

"We'll have to pick our time right," he said, "so we'll have all of low tide."

"Better make it a freeday," put in Arkady, "so we won't have to worry about drudge." In spite of his doubts, he found himself falling in with Zach's

scheme. "You know, stupid as it sounds, going swimming might be fun."

Zach looked smug. "I knew you'd see it my way."

"But I still mean it about your having to find another fool," Arkady added hastily.

"Don't worry," said Zach. "Trust the Yamoto luck to provide."

Once away from the cliffs, they took a shortcut over Administrators' Hill. Arkady lived there, since his father was Gauguin's chief of robotics. Zach and the Yamoto family were technically colonists, but Lucas Yamoto was chief of communications and also rated hillside quarters. Still planning their swimming expedition, the two teens passed behind the Matthews residence.

Suddenly Zach jabbed an elbow into Arkady's ribs.

"Do you see what I see?"

Arkady blinked and shook his hair out of his eyes. "I don't believe it," he said. "But I sure do see it."

Sean was hanging by his hands from a rectangular air vent in the side of the silanna building, seven meters above their heads.

"Hey, Sean!" called Zach, low-voiced. "Need some help?"

"Now that you mention it, yes," came the strained whisper from overhead.

"Don't worry," said Arkady. He moved in closer to the side of the house, and braced himself. "Go ahead and drop. I'll catch you."

Once Sean was on the ground, Zach gave the governor's son a curious look. "Just what were you doing up there, anyway?"

"Crawling through the airvents," said Sean. "What did it look like?"

Zach laughed. "It looked kind of unusual at this time of night, if you ask me. Loco trouble?"

"You might put it that way," said Sean. "Look, if you can help me get back into the house without my parents finding out that I was gone, I'll owe you a big one."

Zach glanced over at Arkady with an expression of pure delight, and then turned back to Sean. "Tell me, how would you like to go swimming?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Night in Ambora

In the dining nook at the Tourni residence, a late dinner was in session. Clea passed the serving plate to Andrena on her left, then helped Sara refill her juice glass. Her own plate remained almost untouched: seeing Sean at the holotheater with Philippa had left a sour taste in her mouth.

Dr. Jon Tourni sampled the mixed vegetables. "They're doing better up at Greendomes," he decided. "This is the third new product this month, and all of them decent."

"Right, Jon," said Dr. Maria Tourni. "In a minute you're going to be telling me how it tastes almost real."

"You're a mind-reader. It tastes almost real."

"Oh, for heaven's sake."

Six-year-old Sara poked at the food with her spoon. "I want my squush."

"Squash, dear," said Dr. Maria Tourni. "We

don't have any squash tonight. Have some cabbage instead."

Eight-year-old Andrena pushed back her chair. "Got to go now, Mom—*Galaxy Patrol's* almost on. You coming, Clea?"

Dr. Maria Tourni looked at Clea. *"Galaxy Patrol?"*

Clea blushed. "Rotten Rupert is kind of fun to look at."

"But he's the bad guy," protested Andrena.

He also has green eyes and long black eyelashes, just like Sean Matthews, thought Clea. Aloud, she said, "You wouldn't understand. Wait till you're older."

Suddenly, as she spoke, a wave of pure misery washed over her— someone else's emotion, and not her own. *Philippa,* she thought. She glanced about the table; but nobody else seemed to have noticed the surge of unhappiness.

Nobody's picking it up but me. The thought gave her a panicky feeling. If the emotional contact had been real, surely her parents and sisters would have felt it through their own empathy. *Maybe what happened up in the mountains is finally driving me crazy.*

She set down her fork with a clatter. "Excuse me, please," she mumbled, and rushed off to her room. Under the table, her pet quufer Fluffy watched her go.

It was a long way from Gauguin to Paul Riedel's home planet of Jaspar, and Will Mornette's step-

brother was feeling every centimeter of the distance. "I wish I were home," he commented aloud.

"So what else is new?" said Will, from the other side of their shared bedroom. The conversation was an old one, and both of them knew the lines. "I miss Acedium."

Will lay stretched out full length on his bed, gazing up at the holodisplay on the ceiling. It was his turn to choose the pattern this week, and he'd chosen a view of the stars over Acedium's Great Central Dome. His pet theskie, Rex Clawfoot, lay full on its scaly belly in the center of the woven rug between the two beds.

Normally, in colony housing, each boy would have had a separate room, but Paul's room was being converted into a nursery for the expected Riedel-Mornette offspring. Add-on work to existing residences ranked at the bottom of Construction's priority list, and

William Mornette, Senior, was no handyman; so like it or not, the two stepbrothers had to share.

"And I am sick and tired," Will continued, "of weighing three times more than I should. At least your homeworld has something like Earth-standard gravity."

Both stepbrothers had come to Gauguin from domeworlds—Will from low-gravity Acedium, and Paul from Jaspar. Acedium, a barren rock with surface gravity too low to hold an atmosphere, was a wholly-owned proprietary planet belonging to InterChem Interplanetary; it special-

ized in products best manufactured under vacuum and low gravity. InterChem Interplanetary also owned Jaspar, whose acid seas, barren rock, and chlorine atmosphere held no life at all, There, ICI could do large-scale chemical processing and produce pollutants galore, without the slightest fear of destroying the local ecology: Jaspar had none to destroy.

Because of their origins, both Paul and Will viewed the open sky, and all the other symptoms of an unregulated environment, with deep suspicion. Tonight, as usual when they were stuck with each other's company, their conversation turned to that characteristic of life on Gauguin most unsettling to former domeworlders—the weather.

"The temperature changes are bad enough," said Will. "But this wind lately is worse. It even makes my skin itch."

"Imbalanced charges," Paul explained. Will's stepbrother— forty kilos' worth of fourteen-year-old genius on a scrawny frame — always had an answer for everything, but Will was discovering that Paul was all right under his pomposity. "And then you have to figure in contamination from all the biological accidentals around. Meteorologically speaking, we're experiencing an extreme lack of humidity combined with extreme low pressure."

"I don't care what the meteorologists call it. I still say air is supposed to circulate gently, not dry you out and blow you away."

Paul nodded agreement. "You wouldn't get that in a properly managed ecosystem. Back on Jaspar, the head of Atmospherics would jump in a reprocessor before she'd let things get into this condition."

"Acedium, too," said Will. "What does the weather station predict for tomorrow, anyway?"

Paul went over to his study terminal—an enlarged version of the student model, since as an advanced student he also did independent research. With a few keystrokes he accessed the meteorology files for the next day's forecast. "As far as I can tell," Paul said, "they're expecting more of the same." He scrolled on down the screen, and then paused. "Now, here's something interesting. We've got an unusually high level of ionization in the atmosphere."

"Where's that coming from?" asked Will.

"Hard to tell without correlation. One of the drawbacks of being the first colonists; our data don't go far enough back to draw a curve." Paul transferred the screen data to his notes. "I'll have to think about it."

Abruptly, Rex Clawfoot, the theskie, pushed up onto its hind feet. The creature opened its mouth, showing long, sharp teeth, and said, "Think! Think or swim. Thick. Thin, swim, sun, sum, some day."

The theskie turned its orange hunter's eyes from Will to Paul, and then lay down again. Will looked at the now-sleeping animal. "The theskies in town are talking better every day," he said.

"Sometimes I think they're trying to tell us something."

"Impossible," said Paul with certainty. "Their braincases are too small for them to have real speech. They just repeat things they've heard, that's all. Pure random noise."

"Is there something wrong?" Dr. Jon Tourni stood in the door of his eldest daughter's room. Fluffy the quufer—its long hair bright green with distress—scuttled past him to curl up on Clea's feet.

Clea lowered the volume on the music. "All right, I'll keep it down." She picked up the quufer and stroked it. The roly-poly animal settled into her lap, wriggling and making little bubbling sounds.

"That wasn't what I asked," said Dr Tourni. He came in and sat down on the end of the bed. "Come on, now, I can tell when there's something on your mind. Want to talk about it?"

"What, been hitting the adolescent psych books again?" Then she saw her father's hurt expression. "No, I didn't mean that. It's just that it's hard having a shrink for a dad. Sometimes I'm not sure when you're, well..."

"Acting in my professional capacity? Don't worry—this is just me doing my worlds-famous 'concerned Dad' routine."

"What for? I'm okay."

"And you usually rush off in the middle of dinner, too. So tell me, what's up?"

Clea hugged the quufer tight. "How would I know ii 1 was going crazy?"

Dr. Tourni shook his head. "You sure ask all the easy questions, don't you? Well, for starters, I'd ask what you meant by crazy, and then, before you even told me, I'd comment that in one sense or another all teenagers are nuts."

Clea gave an unsteady laugh. "Thanks lots. It's just—all of a sudden I felt miserable. But the scary part was, the feeling was somebody else's—and nobody noticed it but me."

"Hmram," said Dr. Tourni. "You never tested that high on the empathic scale back

home ... but adolescence can sometimes cause a temporary peak in the readings. If it keeps up, we can have you tested again."

"Now you *are* doing your shrink routine."

"Habit of a lifetime, I guess. I'm sorry."

The two sat silently for a while. Then Clea's father asked, "How are things with your boyfriend?"

"Fine. I guess." She paused. "He went on a date tonight. Without me."

Dr. Tourni sighed. "I know that it never helps to hear this, but you'll get over it."

Clea raised her head and looked at her father angrily. "Oh, Dad! You don't know!"

"No, I guess not," admitted Dr. Tourni. "But if you need to talk, I'm here." There were a few moments more of silence. Then her father left, and the door slid closed behind him.

Philippa woke up, but didn't open her eyes. Her room was dark, and she could tell it was Sate into Gauguin's evening—almost true night. She had a vague memory, already retreating, of unsettling dreams.

Why did I wake up? she thought. *Maybe my parents are back.*

She lay still for moment, listening, but the house was as quiet now as it had been upon her return. There wasn't even the faint disturbance of the air made by a loco passing on its rounds. But slowly, as she lay there, she became aware that she *was* aware of something; and the awareness, she realized, had come upon her as she slept, and had wakened her.

I know where they are. I know where they all are.

Sean, Will, Clea, Arkady, Zach ... all her friends, the ones who had been with her in that strange, vanishing city in the mountains ... she could locate them in space, effortlessly, just as she could locate her own hands and feet.

Sean is to my left, Will is somewhere downhill ___

She was aware not only of the directions, but of the ranges, in relative terms of near or far. The feeling was spooky, a kind of closeness to other people that she'd never known before, and wasn't certain she wanted now. After a while the feeling of awareness began to fade, and so did her sense of being linked to all the others.

She went back to sleep, and never did wake up when her parents came home.

Outside, the night was ending. Justine and Juliette were high in the sky, both moons waxing toward full. During the middle of the midshift, only a few robots moved about the pathways of Ambora.

Out of the forests to the east, three theskies came running, a small pack, moving easily together. Each theskie held a quufer in its fore-paws, the smaller furry animal grasped

gently in those ferocious-looking claws. The theskies deposited their burdens outside the Spaceport Admin complex, then ran farther into the town.

CHAPTER FIVE

Thought Napoleon Lost

Next morning, Clea arrived at the Bradbury School a little before the start of first period. The day's classes hadn't begun yet; other students clutching portable terminals and racks of data-spools were still coming into the building.

Clea made her way to the history lab, where her section would spend the first hour. Sean Matthews was already there, but she saw with relief that she didn't have to face talking to him alone. Will Mornette stood leaning against the wall by the lab door—partly, she suspected, because leaning was less work, under Gauguin's gravity, than standing up straight, but mostly because leaning on things kept him from towering over everybody around him. The two boys were talking about the rumored arrival of a shipload of new colonists.

"It's true," Sean was saying. "I heard it sort of

officially from Dad at breakfast this morning. Mostly settlers, and some admin types to fill the empty slots."

"Maybe they'll be putting a few more kids into our section," said Will.

"It's bound to happen," said Sean. "Dad says they're projecting at least ten more students in Transition Sector. Permies run to big families."

"Don't I know it," Will sighed. "Oh, hi, Clea."

"Hi, Will, Sean." She looked hurriedly away from Sean—it really wasn't fair for a guy to have such beautiful eyes—and back at Will. "Where do you think the colonists are going to be coming from?"

"Inner worlds, mostly." It was Zach Yamoto who answered her, arriving as usual with a couple of minutes to spare—enough time so that he didn't need to run, but not so long that he'd have to stand around and wait. "The outer planets are still trying to build up their own populations."

"I hope we get some girls," said Will. "I need a date."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Clea. "Don't you guys ever think of anything else?" She glared at Will, who looked puzzled; next to him, Sean reddened and turned away.

"Uh oh," said Zach, laughing. "This is going to get nasty in a minute. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm heading on in."

They filed into the classroom and took their places around the ring of seats. A few

students were already inside and using their portable ter-

minals for review; others, Arkady and Philippa among them, came hurrying in to take their seats just ahead of the bell.

"What's the lesson today?" Clea heard Sean mutter under his breath to Arkady.

"Hey," protested Arkady. *"I'm* the one coming in late."

"We're still on ancient history," put in Philippa from her seat. She gave Sean a glance that Clea couldn't fathom. "Didn't you look at the assignment?"

Sean looked away. "I had other problems."

"You sure did," said Arkady. "And if Zach and I hadn't come by right then, you'd have bigger ones than that."

Before Sean could answer, the bell rang and the robot tutor began its lecture. "Today we will move on to the early pre-nuclear period and the nationalist movement leading to the unification."

"Ancient history," somebody muttered. "Who cares?"

"Is there a question?" inquired the tutor.

The mutterer had been Will Mornette, and now the green "respond" light was on at his position. The robot teacher waited patiently until Will said, "Urn ... yes. I've never gotten a good answer to why we need to study Old Earth. I mean, we can't even see its sun from here."

"Times change," the tutor responded, "and places change, but people do not alter noticeably over as short a period as we are discussing. Another Napoleon, the personage we will be discussing today, remains a possibility. Knowing of such people can help you guard against them."

The tutor waited a moment for more questions, and then continued. "Now, if you will put on your helmets, we will begin the observational history portion of the program. The background music will be the work *Wellington's Victory* by Napoleon's contemporary, the composer Ludwig van Beethoven. Van Beethoven is best known today for his influence on the works of Kleinmark and the early Post-Rockers."

The students settled their holovid helmets in place and found themselves standing on a green field. It was early morning, and a light breeze was blowing. A large number of soldiers in colorful uniforms hurried about, unmindful of the group of students and the robot tutor standing in their midst.

The holovid was in group mode, letting the students see and hear each other as well as their tutor. After waiting for the students to get their bearings, the tutor began to speak.

"Welcome to the morning of June eighteenth, 1815, in the old calendar. We are at a place called Waterloo in Belgium, western Europe. This piece of land has been much fought

over in the history of Earth: Agincourt, of Hundred Years War fame, is only a few kilometers from here; as is Soignies, site of the last defense of the Nationalists during the Rectification that preceded the creation of the Planetary League. But to the day at hand ..."

Clea looked about her. The students, her

friends, were standing about with expressions ranging from fascination to total boredom. The tutor droned on, explaining the sights and sounds around them, the political considerations, the events leading up to the day.

As the class went on, the holovid took them from location to location. Sometimes they seemed to float high above the ground where they could see the grand sweep of events; at other times they clustered around the leaders of one side or the other, listening as the generals made plans and gave orders. The tutor pointed out the significance of each event, and answered questions.

"... At about four in the afternoon, as you can see, Marshal Ney, leading the French cavalry, attacked the Allied center, located between two farms. The Anglo-Dutch forces formed into squares," the tutor went on, "but could not hold against the combined effects of armor and close air support."

Armor? thought Clea. *Air support? I don't remember anything about those in the reading assignment. I'll have to go through it again after school.*

She looked over at Zach. He was frowning.

"Is something wrong?" she whispered.

He nodded, still scowling at the robot tutor. "Tanks and airplanes didn't come along until the century after this one."

"You're sure?"

"1 was raised on Old Earth, remember? Sure I'm sure."

"Pay attention to the visual presentation, please," said the robot tutor. "The main assault is about to begin."

As Clea watched, a line of tracked vehicles broke from cover and began to grind across the field. Overhead, imperial airplanes streaked across the sky, flying low—she could see the Tricolor emblazoned on their wings. As they flew over the British squares, a series of orange-red explosions rocked the scarlet-coated defenders.

The tracked vehicles turned their gunlike projections on the troops still standing. The ends of the big guns glowed from within with a blue light, and Clea heard someone near her gasp. It was Sean Matthews. He had a strange look on his face, as if he wasn't believing what he was seeing.

In the field, the red-coat troops collapsed, writhing, under the blue light from the tanks.

The tutor lectured on.

"This use of cybertanks, equipped with the newly developed mindwhip, helped turn the tide of battle. Never again were the Allies able to field an effective army against the Emperor. Some rearguard actions were fought, of course, but the destiny of France as master of a united Europe was sealed for the coming century."

The scene faded, and the students removed their helmets. "Any questions remaining before the end of the period?"

Clea thumbed her "Query" button. "Yes," she

said. "I thought Napoleon *lost* at Waterloo."

All over the Bradbury School, classes were canceled until technicians could locate the mysterious malfunction in the history lab. Lacking anything better to do, Clea checked in at Transportation to begin her new drudge assignment. The duty schedule had her in the control room; she changed from school clothes into a sturdy coverall, shoved her terminal and data-spools into a locker, and headed up to the second level.

When she reached the control room, she saw that Philippa Bidding had arrived before her. There was a moment of awkward silence. Finally, Clea broke the impasse. "Hi, Philippa."

The girl from Alphorion seemed to relax a little—Clea thought she looked relieved. "Hi, Clea."

"What's the early duty like today?"

Philippa waved a slim, pale hand at the nearest terminal. "Nothing besides checking the schedules for the load transports to Gandria," she said.

"Sounds like real skull-busting work," Clea said.

She joined Philippa at the terminal. Cargo traveled regularly from Ambora to Gandria, Gauguin's second—and only other—city; the drudge duty involved nothing more demanding than monitoring the Transport Section's computers. As the two girls compared the computers' scheduling projections with the actual times

reported by transports on the road, their talk turned back to that morning's history lesson and the chaos that had followed.

"Did you ever see so many techies in one place before?" Clea asked. "I thought they were going to take apart the whole classroom and the tutor too, looking for a malfunction."

"I heard Dr. Ives talking to Mr. Santori," said Philippa. "They never did find it."

"But you saw it, too, right?" asked Clea. "The wrong history, the distortion in the projection?"

Philippa nodded. She was quiet for a moment; then she looked again at Clea and said,

"Can we talk about something?"

"Sure."

Philippa turned half away and made a pretense of checking one of the external monitor screens. The monitor showed a wide-angle view of the smallcraft repair yard. Sean was there, kneeling beside a scooter with a tool in his hand. One of the permanent mechanics was pointing to something on the side of the vehicle.

Philippa watched the screen for a moment, her face unreadable. Clea waited. Finally Philippa said, "It's about last night."

"What about it?" Clea asked stiffly, not at all sure that she wanted to hear what was to follow.

"Well ... Sean and I didn't stay for the whole show."

"I noticed," said Clea.

Philippa nodded. "I was upset because Sean

punched out of date mode without warning me first."

Clea wondered what Philippa was getting at. Emotionally, the other girl had always seemed like a locked file ... it was hard to believe she would reveal anything personal. "You're trying to tell me Sean's not interested in you?"

"I'm trying to tell you why we left the theater," said Philippa. "Sean said he punched out because his holovid helmet was malfunctioning."

"And you didn't believe him."

"Not then," Philippa told her. "But after what happened in class... I think he was probably telling me the truth."

"The helmet really was broken," said Clea. Then another possibility struck her. "Or else —"

"Or else," finished Philippa, "there never was any malfunction, last night *or* today."

CHAPTER SIX

Trouble After School

Will Mornette heaved at the coil of wire on the back of the hoversled. He had to get the loose end of the wire out, and then fasten it to the rod he'd just finished pounding into the ground. Already his arms ached, and sweat poured off him from the effort of hammering in the stake—a task any of the other colonists working Building detail could have handled without even noticing the strain.

After school had been canceled for the day because of the malfunction in the simulation systems, Will had come directly to the construction zone. He'd been helping set up basic housing frames ever since. A steady wind blew out of the east, drying the sweat from his skin but bringing no relief from the grinding fatigue. Far off in the hills he heard a low, growling rumble.

Earthquake? he wondered, feeling a surge of

panic, but the ground was steady underneath his feet. *Not earthquake, then. Thunder.*

He looked about, but none of the other workers seemed to have noticed the distant grumbling in the clouds. / *guess it's not close enough to worry about,* he decided, though as a dome-worider he found himself unable to put the concern out of his mind entirely. *The sky shouldn't make noises like that. It's unnatural.*

The comm-link on the sled beeped. The voice of Tule, the construction leader for the day shift, came crackling over the speaker: "Mornette, return to base."

Will reached over and keyed the link. "I'm in the middle of placing the ground. Can it wait?"

"Negative. Get in here."

Will pushed the coil of wire off the cargo flat, climbed up behind the controls, and set the hoversled in motion. When he reached the prefab shelter that housed construction crew headquarters, Tule was waiting for him in the open doorway.

"What's up, boss?" Will asked.

"They want your young body over at Education," said Tule, "and I mean now. Pri Three call. Use the sled. Now scoot."

Minutes later, Will walked into the school dome—and almost into Mr. Oblitt, one of the human instructors for the younger levels. "Director's office, young man," Oblitt said, without waiting for Will to speak.

What is this? Will wondered. / *haven't done*

anything wrong. At least I don't think I have.

When he stepped through the door into Dr. Ives's outer office, he was surprised to see Zach, Sean, Philippa, and Clea—all still in their working coveralls—already there. Like him, they'd clearly been pulled out of their drudge assignments; Sean Matthews hadn't even gotten time to wipe the grease and oil off his hands.

"What's going on?" Will asked.

"Be quiet." Mr. Santori, the deputy director of the Bradbury School, rose from behind his desk as Will spoke. "You're in serious enough trouble. Frankly, I had thought better of you all."

Huh? thought Will. / *thought they saved that line for the really heavy-duty stuff. And I*

know I haven't done anything that bad.

The door to the inner office slid open and Arkady Davidov came out. The stocky, muscular Thetan didn't look as if he'd had a pleasant time of it.

"Mornette," said Mr. Santori. "The Director is ready to see you now."

Will walked into the director's office, where Dr. Ives was waiting. Diplomas and certificates covered the wall behind the director's wide desk: Southern Alphorion District College, B.A. 2469; Alphorion Central University, M.A. 2471; University of Pennsylvania, Ph.D. 2476. There was no place for Will to sit.

The director fixed his eyes on Will. The office was dim enough that their whites glowed faintly green. *He probably keeps the lights low on pur-*

pose, Will thought. *Just to make people nervous.*

"Well, Mr. Mornette," Dr. Ives began. "I'd like an explanation."

Okay, I'm nervous. I'm also confused. Out loud, Will said, "I'm afraid I don't understand you, sir."

"Then allow me to clarify," said the director. "You and your friends managed to shut down the Transition Sector for an entire day with your story of computer malfunction. The technicians were unable to find anything wrong with the system. You and your little group of friends, and nobody else, reported these supposed events. I'd like to know why."

So would I, Will thought. *What did we do to deserve this?* "I'm sorry, sir. But 1 only reported what I saw. I can't explain anything else."

"Maybe I can explain a little bit for you," said Dr. Ives. "You hoped to get a day off by disrupting our schedule."

"No, sir. I went right to my dr . .. my community service."

"As may be. Nevertheless, I'm assigning you five hours additional service for your part in this affair. That's all. You may go now."

He's jugged us, thought Will as the door slid open. *It isn't fair.* He left the office and rejoined his friends. An unsmiling Santori handed out additional-service slips all around.

Together, the group left the school dome and headed across the plaza. "We told the truth," said Sean Matthews, frowning, "and they didn't believe us—again."

Will nodded. "You won't catch me reporting any more computer malfunctions."

"If that's what it really was," Clea said.

"What else could it be?" he demanded. "We can't all be crazy."

Nobody said anything. Will realized that, like him, the others must be remembering the visions on the plateau—they'd had no computers or holo-vids up there. Zach Yamoto

seemed to shake off the memory first; he pushed his hair back from his face and turned to Sean. "Where'd you get jugged?"

"Building Materials," Sean replied. "And a 'Check for change in regular community service' notation here on the back. What about you?"

A comparison of slips revealed that everybody except Will had drawn jug in one or another of the construction details. Will had been assigned to the Information Resource Center as a filing assistant. A quick stop by the regular Service board showed that everybody—except Will again—had been rotated early to Construction. Will had been reassigned to Greendomes for his drudge.

"They're putting up housing double-quick," said Sean. "That settler ship must be closer than we thought."

Over in the Research Dome, Paul Riedel was absorbed in the independent research project assigned to him by Dr. Petrov, Gauguin's resident geophysicist. Paul only attended classes part

time; the rest of his school day was taken up with supervised study. It was one of the things that happened when you skipped years of school, and then couldn't get off-planet until an empty slot appeared in one of the big inner-world universities.

Officially, Paul was working on the tidal patterns of Gauguin, in preparation for the construction of a seaport once some of the other continents opened up for settlement. But today he was digging into the weather patterns for the southern continent, using the more extensive data available here at Research.

The anomaly he'd noticed the night before still intrigued him. "Let's see," he said. "Check on tides for historical Gauguin versus atmospheric pressure versus ionization levels."

He sat back and studied the screen display. "All right. Now model lunar influence on the planetary magnetic blanket versus surface temperature versus wind direction."

"What are you muttering to yourself about?" asked Dr. Petrov, walking up behind Paul. The geophysicist looked closely at the three-dimensional graph rotating on the monitor. "Is this part of your project?"

"I'm not certain what it is," Paul replied. "But look at the trend, there on the right. There's a peak coming in the ionization level, but I'm not sure what it will do. And this is the biggest surge in charged-particle rates we've got in the data base for this or ..." he entered a string of numbers, and the result came up on-screen, "... or any other planet."

"Interesting," commented Dr. Petrov. "But a *little* removed from your primary research, I think. I'd concentrate on the latter, if I were you." The geophysicist went back to his own work. Paul printed out a screen dump of the data and turned back to his job of modeling the tidal currents of Sanjo Bay.

Will walked slowly through the center of the dome complex, his muscles still aching from the construction work and his thoughts in an unhappy jumble. One of the town's many theskies came striding up on its long hind legs, its clawed forelimbs tucked under its chest. The creature fell in beside Will and paced along with him in the direction of the holotheater.

"What would *you* do?" Will demanded of the native beast.

"Be bloody, bold, and resolute," the feathery creature responded.

"Not bad," said Will, "but not a big help either."

"Help, yelp, see the end."

"And that's not all of it," complained Will. Talking to theskies was probably only a step above talking to yourself; but at least the random responses provided the illusion of a sympathetic listener. "They let me work on buildings until buildings have to be built, and then it's 'Sorry, get out of the way.' It's not fair."

"Fair, fair, are the lights, all fair, far down

beneath the dim west," said the theskie. "See what there is, and do what you say to see the end justifies philogyny."

"Thanks for the thought," said Will. "Maybe I should just skip drudge today. Then at least I'll get jugged for something I've done."

"Done," said the theskie. "What will be done by will's will will be, will."

"That's my name, all right. Don't wear it out."

The theskie fell silent again, and made no sound the rest of the way to the small building shared by the holovid theater and the Information Resource Center. Will paused outside the theater entrance.

"The heck with it," he said. "I'm not going anywhere but right here."

He went on into the theater, took a seat, and put on the helmet and gloves. Syrupy "waiting" music filled his ears, but nothing else happened.

You can't even goof off right, Mornette, he told himself. *It's still too early.*

Disgusted with himself and the universe in general, he took off the holoviewing gear and walked outside into the plaza. The sun was going down, casting long purple shadows that contrasted sharply with the bright blue light in the open areas.

The streets seemed quieter than usual for this hour. *Everyone's probably at work making ready for the inbound ship,* thought Will. *They just don't have any use for a weak-kneed freak like me.*

A sharp crack broke the silence. Will spun

around—life on the domeworlds trained you to recognize sounds like that. Sure enough,

the building immediately behind him, the Medical Center, had a fissure running through its silanna walls from top to bottom. Another crack, and the dome's top collapsed like a bashed-in eggshell.

There are people trapped in there! Will thought. He ran for the crumbling structure, but his weak body wouldn't propel him fast enough. He stumbled, fell facedown on the pavement in the center of the square, struggled up onto his hands and knees.

A gust of wind caught him and rocked him back onto his heels. Rain blew into his eyes. The wind picked up; now dust was flying, as well as rain. He saw people being pushed along by the force of the wind, and then the rubble of the Medical Center began to fly by him with the rain and the people, all swirling past against the twilight.

The top layers of the other domes began to slide away into the darkness. With a crash, the sea rose straight into the air away to the west, a wall of water hanging suspended, reaching up to the sky, lost in the black clouds. Purple lightning bolts began to play over the buildings—striking, arcing, thunder booming. When the lightning struck the topless domes around him, they reformed into square-cut blocks, stacking themselves into buildings of strange angles and alien proportions.

One of the cybertanks from the morning's history lesson rounded the corner. Its polished barrel glowed with a blue light, over and over. The people around Will weren't people anymore: they were something different, reptilian, with orange skin and oval, amber eyes. All around them, the blue light glowed and the lightning crackled and surged.

Will, on his knees, looked down at the ground in front of him and saw the bright orange housing of a shutoff switch set into the pavement. He raised the cover and thumbed the Toroid Button.

Abruptly, he was back in the empty theater, still lifting the simulation helmet from his head. He'd never removed the helmet, he realized; that, too, had been part of the illusion.. .or whatever. . .that he had witnessed.

Jannie Tereriff, manager of Ambora's holo-theater, came into the viewing room and gave him an odd look. "Hey, Will," said the slender, dark-eyed woman. "What are you doing here? The first show isn't for an hour."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Life's a Beach

"Hot damn!" Zach rolled out of bed and started pulling clean clothes out of the storage module. "Freeday at last!"

Hurriedly, he dressed and punched up his friends' comm codes on his study terminal. "Everybody ready?" he typed. "Meet you at the bottom of Admin Hill at ten-time. Bring

your towels."

A few minutes later he was steering a light, one-person hoverscooter toward the meeting place, his hair blowing back from his face as the scooter sped along. Behind him, Admiral balanced on top of the cargo compartment, the theskie's clawed forefeet resting on his shoulders.

At the rendezvous, Zach found Arkady, Philippa, Clea, and Will already waiting, along with Will's stepbrother Paul Riedel and their theskie, Rex Clawfoot. Zach wondered for a

moment at the presence of Will's stepbrother and then gave a mental shrug. *Maybe Mr. Mornette and Ms. Riedel wanted a morning alone together for a change,* he thought. *They haven't been married all that long.*

He nodded at Paul and Will, scratched Rex Clawfoot on the skull, and asked, "Where's Sean?"

"He said he couldn't make it," said Arkady.

"A likely story," said Zach. "That's the last time I save his life, let me tell you."

He turned the hoverscooter toward the path to the cliffs. The others tossed their gear into the cargo compartment.

"Ready for the big adventure?" he asked. "Let's go." He started the hoverscooter again, this time at a walking pace so that the others could keep up on foot.

It was another hot, windy day. The blue sun of Gauguin shone down on the domes of Ambora. The Tati River flowed smoothly under the arching bridges, its water level high in spite of the dry weather. Paul Riedel, who'd explain anything to anyone if given half a chance, attributed its height to seasonal rains in the mountains around Gandria.

"Conversely," Paul went on—Will's stepbrother was the only person Zach knew who actually used words like "conversely" in everyday conversation—"we'll get our lowest water levels at the height of the Amboran rainy season."

"Weird," said Zach. He glanced over at Paul. *The* younger boy was walking alongside the hoverscooter, a little apart from the others like

always. "Will says you've been digging into weather and tides a lot on your own time."

Paul looked a bit self-conscious and nodded. "If my calculations are right, we have about six hours of low water."

A little while later, the group reached the cliffs overlooking the bay. Zach brought the hover-scooter to a halt. The tide was out, and this time the expanse of glistening black sand stretched even farther out toward the horizon. Sunlight glittered off the distant water, and the breaking waves made feathery lines of white against the blue.

"It's beautiful," said Clea. "But is it safe?"

"Only one way to find out." Zach opened the scooter's cargo compartment and brought out some lengths of rappelling line, D-rings, detachable links, and gloves. "Just like in gym class," he said. "Going down."

"What about the path down the cliffs?" Arkady asked.

"Walking is for toroids," said Zach. "But if you want to take the long way around, we'll meet you on the beach in a couple of hours."

Arkady shook his head. "No way. Give me one of those."

Soon, all the teens were bounding their way down the cliff to the black sand beach below. Up

above, Admiral and Rex Clawfoot watched them descend.

At the same time, Sean was sitting with his father and mother in the passenger compartment of the heavy cargo transport to Gandria.

"I had plans for today, you know," he grumbled as the transport rose atop the glowing yellow pressor beam that held it a steady half-meter above the ground. With a faint hum, the vehicle slid forward, gathering speed until the landscape outside the windows slipped past in a blur.

"This processing plant is important," his father said. "We'll be using all the silanna they can produce—right now, Construction is importing it by the shipload even though we're sitting on fields of the stuff."

"That's fine for Construction," Sean said. "But can't they open the plant without me?"

His mother sighed. "Sean, the invitation said 'Governor Matthews and family.' That means all of us, whether you like it or not."

"Name me three people in Gandria who'd notice if I even showed up," challenged Sean.

"More of them than you'd think, son," said his father. "The Gandrians tend to feel isolated enough as it is, and feeling isolated's just a step away from feeling forgotten. If Gauguin's governor and his family feel free to ignore an invitation to what—for Gandria—is a very big event, the Gandrians are going to take it as an indication

of just where they rank on the administration's list *of* priorities."

"All *right, all* right," said Sean. "I'm here, aren't *I?" And breaking a promise to my friends,* he added silently. *Just so some toroids up in the mountains won't get their feelings hurt. And so I won't hear again how I've disappointed them by being part of a practical joke,* he reminded himself, wishing his parents believed his version of the history class.

He stared moodily out the window of the transport, watching the road to Gandria flash by. The last time he'd been along this road had been on the ill-fated mountain expedition when he and his friends had found that ruined city on the high plateau. No one had

believed them then. And now—with the holovids in Ambora going wrong for them and them alone—it was all starting to happen again.

Sean felt disgusted with the world in general, and adults in particular. *You'd think they'd do something more than pat us on the head and say 'My, what active imaginations you children have!'* he thought. Maybe there was still a way to prove what they had all seen, but he couldn't figure it out.

Instead, he was stuck in a cargo transport bound for what was probably going to be the dullest afternoon of his life, while all his friends were out having fun on the shores of Sanjo Bay. He could feel the kilometers between them increasing with every minute the journey continued.

The Great Seawater Swimming Experiment, as Zach had formally dubbed the excursion to the Sanjo beach, was turning out to be a smashing success. Only Clea, as it developed, had actually been swimming in anything besides an artificial pool—but Galahad was a world of streams and spring-fed lakes with nothing to match the vast seas of Gauguin.

"It's not like this," she said quietly to Zach, as the two of them stood at the edge of the water. A breaking wave sent a wash of foam curling up around their ankles as she spoke. "I'm not used to water that stretches out so far you can't see what's on the other side."

"They'll be running ships on it eventually," said Zach. "Wind-powered, probably, like in the old days. I've seen flatpix in history books—they looked like clouds skimming over the water." He looked out at the horizon, imagining the lean, fast ships with their banks of sails. "I'd like to try that some day."

Philippa came wading ashore in time to catch his remarks. "Isn't getting all of us soaked in brine good enough for you?" she asked, wringing out her long fair hair.

In spite of her words, Philippa was smiling, and Zach realized that the girl from Alphorion was enjoying the day as much as anybody else. She'd taken to the open water with surprising confidence, going out beyond the surfzone and swimming with long easy strokes. Because of her slen- I

der build and the unusual fairness of her skin, people tended to think of Philippa Bidding as delicate, even helpless—*but if that's true,* Zach thought, *I'll empty breakfast trays in the cafeteria slopline for a week.*

Now, though, he merely grinned at Philippa and said, "Just thinking ahead, that's all."

Out past the breaking waves, where the water was calmer, Will and Arkady floated, bobbing gently up and down. Will had his eyes closed, but he knew that if he opened them he'd find Arkady treading water and wearing a faint scowl of concentration. The idea that human beings would actually float remained something the Thetan still had trouble accepting wholeheartedly. For Will, though ...

The former domeworlder gave a contented sigh. "I could do this forever."

"You'll wash out to sea and drown if you do," said Arkady.

"lt'd be worth it," said Will. "I haven't felt this light since I left Acedium."

"You're supposed to keep moving, not just lie there."

"Who needs to go places? Relax and let the water hold you up."

"For heaven's sake, Will," said Arkady. "Even Paul can swim a little—I saw him paddling around a-bit before he got out and started collecting rocks or something like that."

"Fine," said Will. "If you want swimming lessons every day on top of drudge and jug and school, it's your schedule, not mine. I'm managing okay without them."

A sharp whistle came from the shore. Will opened his eyes. "It's Zach," he said. "I think it's lunch time."

Using the maneuvering skills of a lifetime spent under one-third gravity, Will propelled himself toward shore. Arkady followed awkwardly. All too soon, Will's feet touched the black sand bottom, and he felt Gauguin's relentless gravity pulling him downward once again.

Zach, Clea, and Philippa had already spread out a plastic dropcloth on the damp sand. While everybody gathered around the coolers full of food and drink, Will stretched out full length on the sand, letting the sun warm him after the time he'd spent in the water's cool support. "This," he said to Zach, "is definitely one of the better crazy ideas you've come up with. Especially after a whole week in jug."

"Oh, absolutely," said Philippa. The Alphorionite paused in her task of reapplying sunscreen to her pale skin. "Too bad Sean couldn't make it."

Clea nodded. "Talk about getting double-jugged ... We're having fun on a real beach, and he's up in Gandria being bored out of his mind."

Something in her voice made Philippa look at her curiously. "You're not just guessing, are you?" the Alphorionite asked. "You can really tell."

Clea nodded. "I've always been able to do that a little," she explained. "A lot of Galahadans can, with people close by. It's no big deal. But now— sometimes—I can do it with people a long way off."

Will's stepbrother looked curious. "All people, or only some people?"

"Just some people," said Clea. "And not all the time."

"Who"—Paul started to ask, but Philippa, her blue eyes intent and serious, was already speaking.

"Nobody on Alphorion's ever been able to do anything like that... but I've started being able to tell where ..." she hesitated, glanced at Paul, and then went on, "where some people are just by thinking about them."

Some people, thought Will. *She means the six of us. And so did Clea.* "All the time?"

Philippa shrugged. "It comes and goes."

"Just like a malfunctioning holovid," said Will.

"What do you mean?" asked Zach Yamoto.

"I ran into another one of those right after Laser Eyes jugged us," Will said, and told the story of the illusions he'd seen in the deserted theater.

"We saw tanks just like that in the history lesson," said Clea, when he'd finished.

Philippa nodded. "And Sean saw *something* in the holotheater the night before."

"Seriously strange," Zach Yamoto said. "If it didn't sound so unbelievable, I'd think someone was trying to tell us something."

"Maybe," Will agreed. "And maybe whatever's causing this is just playing some elaborate prank. I mean, if these visions *are* some kind of message, what is it they're telling us?"

"Beats me," Zach said with a shrug. "All I know is we'd better not say anything to the powers that be," he went on. "They're already steamed about those mixed-up history holovids. Start talking about things like long-distance empathy, and we've had it."

Arkady looked curious. "What can they do? Put us in jug? We're already there."

"That's because they think we made false reports deliberately to cause trouble," Zach explained. "But once they start believing we made honest reports of what we *thought* we saw, they'll hand us over to the shrinks for fine-tuning and we can kiss our freedays good-bye."

Late that evening—back from Gandria, and convinced that opening a silanna plant set some kind of record for boredom—Sean sat studying at the Information Resource Center. He was trying to catch up on his still-unfinished ancient history reading when he felt a peculiar sensation, not quite physical and not quite mental, somewhere between the back of his mind and the back of his neck.

Someone's coming, he thought, and looked up to see Zach Yamoto approaching.

"Thought you might be here," Zach said. "How was your day?"

"Don't ask," said Sean. "And don't tell me how great yours was, either. Clea and Philippa have both already dropped by, individually, to tell me what a good time they had, and how it was too bad, just too bad, that I couldn't be there with all the rest of you guys."

Zach looked at his friend. "Not a word about today. How would you like to be along with the next beach expedition? I have something really special cooked up. Besides, you still owe me."

"Anything to save me from another day like this one," Sean replied. "What do you have

in mind?"

"Can you come by my place tomorrow night? Everybody else will be there. I'll show all of you then."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Communication Failures

The next evening after dinner, Sean strolled down Admin Hill, heading for the collection of children, adults, quufers, theskies, neighbors, and friends that formed the Yamoto family household. The sprawling silanna conglomeration of sleeprooms, workrooms, and storage spaces stood on the boundary between administrative housing and the settlers' homes. In short order, therefore, it had developed into a natural gathering spot for both the admin types and the permanent colonists.

The Yamotos themselves filled a similar spot in Ambora's social structure. As a retired officer in the League Patrol—the organization in charge of keeping interplanetary peace, regulating space-flight, and generally maintaining law and order in the Planetary League—Commander Yamoto ranked with the planet builders who set up the first structures of a new society before moving on to their next assignments. But Lucas Yamoto had left the Patrol after twenty years of service, and had chosen to settle on this world as a colonist to make Gauguin his family's permanent home.

The night was warm and fragrant. The wind off the eastern hills brought the mingled smells of Gauguin's flowering trees and shrubs. As Sean ambled down the slope he realized that for several nights now, the colony hadn't gotten the usual evening breeze blowing from the west off Sanjo Bay. *Funny,* he thought, *how fast you get used to a place's weather. The night air just doesn't seem right without the saltwater smell in it.*

He could hear and see the party at the Yamotos' well before he approached—nothing rowdy, just chattering voices and the yellow light from a couple of portable miniglows set out on the lawn. He drew nearer, and saw that the rest of the gang, except for Will, had already shown up.

As Sean joined the teenagers scattered about on the soft, plushy turf, Zach handed him a paper carton from the cooler nearby. "Have a swig of Greendomes' latest."

Sean looked at the label. "'Gauguin Punch'?"

"Hey, Grumps is no poet," said Zach. "But the stuff does contain all the trace elements humans need that this planet hasn't got."

Philippa crumpled up an empty carton and tossed it into a nearby recycling bin. "I think I'd sooner swallow supplement tabs at breakfast."

"Oh, come on," said Clea. "It's not that bad; and besides, you just drank it."

"That's only because she's too law abiding to pour it out on the grass," said Arkady. "After all, she might drown a bug or something that way, and killing a native life-form gets you ten to twenty in the asteroid mines."

"Funny," said Philippa, without visible mirth.

The blond Alphorionite looked ready to fall into one of her prickly don't-touch-me moods. Sean quickly changed the subject. "So tell us, Zach—what's the big innovation this time?"

"In a bit," Zach replied. "It's only right that those who helped create it be here for the grand unveiling."

A few minutes later, footsteps sounded on the path. Will and his stepbrother came into the light of the miniglows, with Rex Clawfoot striding along behind.

"Have I missed anything?" Will asked.

"Only Gauguin Punch," said Sean. "It's horrible."

"I tried it yesterday," said Will. "It tastes better when you're hot and sweaty." He turned to Zach. "You haven't started yet?"

"We were waiting for you," Zach said. He stood up. "Now if everyone would please follow me over to the workroom ..."

They walked around the house to the utility dome. Along the way, they passed Lucas Yamoto's non-hydroponic garden under its own clear plastic bubble. Inside, flowers and vegetables from a half-dozen different worlds grew in ordered profusion.

"Just how much space does your family rate, anyway?" Philippa asked Zach. "This place is bigger than the Governor's house."

Zach grinned. "One of the benefits of having six siblings."

"Your poor mother," said Clea. "Mine has enough trouble with three."

"Mom always claims she went into pediatrics because she wanted a big family," said Zach.

"Yeah," said Will. "But seven? The League should have given her an honorary license whether she studied or not."

The group reached the utility dome as he spoke. Zach slid the door open and pulled out a long, narrow object, about two meters from end to end.

"What," asked Clea, "is *that?"*

"That," said Zach proudly, "is a surfboard."

Sean tapped the board. It sounded hollow. "What's a surfboard and what do you do with one?"

"You ride the waves on it," Zach explained. He reached back into the utility dome and pulled out a sheaf of flatpix. "Like in these pictures."

Sean looked at the printouts of young people in archaic garb balancing the narrow boards atop curling waves. "Where'd you get these?"

"Pulled them out of Archives," said Zach. "You wouldn't believe what you find if you search on weird things, like 'ocean as recreation area.'"

Arkady gave the surfboard an experimental heft. "What's this made of, anyway?"

Expanded silanna, just like the houses," Zach told him. "Paul here figured out the theory as soon as I explained what we were after, and then Will and I ran framework and current to grow us a whole set of them."

Sean looked from Zach to the surfboards and back again. "So these are what kept you busy in the Construction shop after drudge."

"That's right," said Zach. He took the surfboard from Arkady and put it back inside the dome. "Let's get on with the party. I found some flatvids in Archives that I want to show."

Back on the other side of the house, the Yamoto family loco was waiting with a small flatvid projector. The teens all found seats on the lawn; and the loco, using a stretch of blank wall as a screen, began to show flickering scenes of young men and women riding surfboards. From the jerky movement and faded colors of the figures, the record was clearly centuries old.

"Archives found this one in the entertainment files," said Zach. "They've got a whole collection in there—'Forgotten Gems of Pre-Rectification Flat-Screen Film-Making.' Lots of good stuff in it, too. This one's called *Gidget Goes Hawaiian."*

Not for the first time, Sean marveled at how much time and effort Zach Yamoto could put into a project—just as long as nobody told him it was work.

For a while, Sean sat watching the long-dead surfers at play. Then he lobbed his empty punch carton into the bin and made his way over to Philippa. She was sitting by herself, as if the earlier mood of withdrawal had come back to claim her again. He stopped while he was still a little distance away and sat down just out of arm's reach.

"What do you think of Zach's latest?" he asked.

She gave him a quick glance. The whites of her eyes gave off a bright, steady gleam, even now when the rest of her face made only a pale blur against the night.

"It looks ... different," she said.

"Nothing much like it on Alphorion, I suppose."

"No."

This is going nowhere in a hurry, Sean thought. "Look," he said aloud, "are you still mad

at me?"

"Not particularly."

"Then what's wrong?" he asked. "You've been keeping away from me ever since I showed up."

She shook her head. "It's not you."

He sat for a moment, feeling frustrated. Then something—perhaps the memory of that amber message on his father's computer screen, ALL INFORMATION ON THIS SUBJECT RESTRICTED—prompted him to say, "If you're in some kind of trouble, Philippa, why don't you tell me abou—"

He stopped. She'd turned her head to look straight at him, and the unwavering green light in her eyes demanded silence. "Because nobody

gave you the right to ask that kind of question," she said. "Nor to get any answers."

He felt his cheeks starting to burn. *She can't know you read her file in the datanet,* he told himself, but it didn't help. "I'm sorry," he said.

But her flare of emotional energy had died out as suddenly as it had arisen. She sat with her arms wrapped around her knees and looked away from him, out into the dark. After a while, Sean got up and wandered back over to the main group, leaving Philippa sitting alone.

He looked for Clea and found her still watching the flatvid with the others: the original gang from Transition Sector, plus all the neighborhood theskies, three or four of Zach's brothers and their friends, and five or six quufers that seemed to have sprung up from the ground like mushrooms while he wasn't looking. Clea glanced up as he approached.

"Hello, Sean," she said. "Isn't it a bit late to be picking out your date for the evening?"

"I don't believe it," said Will to Arkady.

"Believe what?" asked Arkady, without taking his eyes from the flatvid. He still didn't see how this thing called surfing could really work, even though he could hear Paul Riedel explaining the physics involved to anyone who would listen. "The great lover just got zapped. Twice." "You're talking about Sean-the-governor's-son Matthews, right?" said Arkady. "The guy who's currently going after *both* the best-looking girls in Ambora?"

"That's our man." Will confirmed. "Except that right now it looks like he hasn't got either one of them."

"You don't say."

Arkady stood up and stretched, taking the opportunity to check out the rest of the party as he did so. Clea Tourni and Sean Matthews still sat next to each other, but the Galahadan had her head turned away and was talking animatedly with Zach's younger

brother Tris. Arkady looked for Philippa—whose pale skin and glowing eyes should have made her easy to spot—and finally located her at the edge of the group. As he watched she rose from the lawn, glanced at Sean and Clea, then turned and walked uphill into the darkness.

Arkady sighed and sat back down again. "Give it up," he said to Will. "They'd rather ignore Sean than notice us."

"I'm not surprised," said Will. "I don't know about you, but I'm pinning my hopes on that settler ship."

"I copy," said Arkady. "I copy you all the way."

The sounds of Zach Yamoto's party followed Philippa Bidding as she made her way uphill toward her family's quiet, well-appointed residence. Years ago, before she was old enough to know better, she'd daydreamed about being part of a family like that. She'd even imagined a whole set of brothers and sisters for herself, and given them names. After she finally understood that she was and would be the only child Joan and Allen Bidding would ever have, she'd given the names to her dolls instead.

Much later, when she realized that she herself was only a sort of ornament—part of the expected household furnishings of an ambitious young administrative couple—she'd put all the dolls away.

None of which, she told herself bitterly, *explains why you're running away from the only friends you've got. Sean was just trying to help... and Arkady was only joking when he called you "law-abiding." He couldn't know. ...*

The house, when she reached it, was empty. Her parents had left that morning for a conference with the Gandrian aquaculture development board, and wouldn't be back for several days. The loco stood motionless in the entryway; she'd "fixed" the robot before leaving for the party.

The emptiness hurt a bit, after the lively crowd down the hill. For a moment, she considered going back, but then she shook her head.

Who could I talk to, after all? Not Sean, after the way I just acted. And not Clea, as long as Sean's there too. Zach's nice... but he'll be busy dividing himself among four or five kids and a couple of theskies and his latest project and somebody's problems in school ... and Will's so wrapped up in missing life in the domeworlds

that he isn't even noticing girls... and Arkady...

She paused for moment, thinking of the muscular, sandy-haired Thetan, and then headed on toward her room. Arkady liked her, she was sure of it—liked her just as much as he liked everybody else in their group, and no more.

She threw herself down on her bed next to the quufer she'd brought home from the holotheater after that disastrous evening with Sean Matthews.

"Typical, isn't it," she said aloud to the quufer. "You can't be friends with the ones who want to date you ... and the ones who are friendly never ask you out."

CHAPTER NINE

Houses of Sand

The party at the Yamotos' broke up earlier than usual since the next day was a workday. Transition Sector's classes had already been canceled so that the students could put in a full stint with the construction gangs. Arkady helped Zach and two or three younger Yamoto sibs clean up the lawn, and then headed for home.

As he approached his family's house, he saw a yellow light glowing through the window of the workroom in back. Arkady smiled to himself.

Dad's working after hours again, he thought. Josef Davidov tinkered with robots the way Lucas Yamoto puttered in his non-hydroponic garden: not for any practical reward, but for the pure pleasure of bringing order to a small corner of a chaotic universe. If sometimes a basket of fresh tomatoes got traded for a reconditioned motor ... well, that was only a happy accident.

Arkady paused for a moment, then went around to the back. The workroom door opened at his knock. He went in, and found the elder Davidov making adjustments to a KRKS-7 series Robot Delivery Subsystem. The stocky, black-mustached Thetan looked up as Arkady entered. "Hello, Arkady. How was the party?"

"All right, I guess."

"Just 'all right'? Somebody's slipping over at the Yamotos'."

"Probably me," said Arkady. "Dad ... as long as I'm here anyway, could I talk to you about something?"

"Go right ahead," said his father. "I can listen and work at the same time."

Arkady hesitated a second longer, and then plunged in. "I've been wondering ... is there any way to tell whether something you see is real or not?"

Josef Davidov sat back on his heels and regarded his son thoughtfully. "That's a good question. And I don't think 'Study harder and have a chat with Dr. Tourni' is the sort of answer you had in mind, either."

"Uh ... no, sir."

"Didn't think so." His father lifted the heavy KRKS-7 back onto its hoverpads without apparent effort. "Well, then—if something you see is in fact real, your other senses should be able to detect it too. If you can see and touch something, or see and hear it, the odds are better for its reality than otherwise."

Arkady nodded. "What about if what you have is a feeling or belief?"

"Those are tougher," said his father. "If someone else feels or thinks the same thing, your chances get better, but it's no guarantee. Even if everyone thinks a thing is true, that doesn't make it so. We've seen enough of that before in history."

"Urn, well .. . yeah," said Arkady. "History was what I was going to ask you about. You remember that broken history simulation—the one everybody said was just fine?"

"I remember."

"Well, I wasn't the only one who saw those effects that day." Arkady paused. "And other people have gotten the same sort of thing on different machines."

Josef Davidov looked doubtful. "Holovid technology's been around a long time. There's not much that can go wrong."

"We're not making things up!" protested Arkady.

"I never said you were," said his father. "How about telling me what happened with the other machines?"

Arkady told him briefly about Sean's experience with Philippa, and Will's solo adventure. When he was done, his father asked, "What things do you people have in common? That might give you some clues to the answer."

Arkady frowned for a moment, thinking. "I've known all these people since we got lost together in the mountains. We get on each other's nerves sometimes, but I'd trust them anywhere. And I know that I saw what I saw."

"That's good enough for me," said his father. "Isolating the source of the problem, now ... that may be difficult. But a coil and recording device clipped to the input side of a holovid helmet would give you a permanent record of whatever went into that particular spot—whether it came from the central output or not."

Arkady nodded, his mind already drifting back to the interrupted history class. There'd been something else bothering him about that simulation, something besides the mixed-up history....

"Dad, what color is Earth's star?"

Josef Davidov had one of the magnetic side plates off the robot and was attaching test leads to one of the internal stepper motors. If the question surprised the older man, he didn't show it. "Somewhere in the yellow range, I believe; it's been a while since I studied galactic geography."

"Yellow," said Arkady. "I thought so." The sun that had shone down upon the illusory battlefield had been blue, like Gauguin's.

He said as much, and his father nodded. "They probably shot the outdoor effects for the holovid on another blue-sun world. This isn't the only one in the galaxy, you know."

"I know," said Arkady. "But the history simulations usually don't slip up that way."

Once again, he flashed back in his mind to the scene of the re-created battle: the dark, blue green turf; the far-off, hot blue sun; the dots of brighter green that moved across the bloody plain—hundreds of frightened and uneasy quu-fers, converging on the dead.

He shook his head, puzzled. "Dad, every time I think about that class, I remember more stuff that I didn't notice the first time. You don't think I'm imagining it, do you?"

"No," said Josef Davidov. "But you do need proof."

"But how do I get it?"

"As soon as the commotion over the new settlers dies down," said his father, "we'll see about rigging you some kind of recording device. Right now, though, why don't you give me a hand fixing this KRKS? Tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

Morning came, clear and bright. The hot, dry wind still blew steadily off the mountains, and in the eastern sky white clouds puffed up into billowing towers.

All of Ambora vibrated with activity. Perched on the upper framework of a house under construction, Clea Tourni could see the streets and bridges crowded with colonists making last-minute preparations for the arrival of the settler ship. The long-legged, dappled-tan shapes of theskies popped up everywhere, and the landscape was dotted with bright brown and orange puffballs that she knew were quufers.

"You know," she said aloud, "I think there's more of them around than ever."

"More what?" asked Philippa Bidding, who sat astride the framework one meter over. The Alphorionite had her long hair pulled back for safety and covered with a scarf, with a long-billed work cap set atop that to shade her face.

"Quufers," said Clea, as she ran a wire trace up the basic housing form. "They're all over the place lately."

"Well, I don't mind them," said Philippa. She attached her own lead to the framework. "Quufers don't get into things the way the theskies do."

Clea nodded. "They had to chase a theskie out of the girls' locker room yesterday, over at school."

"How corrosive," said Philippa.

Before Clea could reply, a shout of "Ready!" came from the other side of the dome's framework. A girl whom they hardly knew—Yadira Odetts, from one of the other sections—had just finished wiring her part of the framework.

"Ready!" Clea called back. With Philippa and Yadira, she climbed down from the skeleton of the house-to-be. Almost before they reached the ground, she heard a low humming noise. A moment later Sean Matthews and Zach Yamoto guided hoversleds loaded with containers of dry-processed silanna up to the bottom of the electronic grid

pattern.

When the boys had nudged the two sleds into place, Clea looked at Philippa and Yadira. The other two girls nodded.

"Feed it!" she called.

The two boys plugged the acceptor arrays into the containers. The silanna started spreading along the network of wires. From there, the building's fast-growing skin stretched out to cover the gaps in the frame, solidifying in translucent beauty which matched the hues of the planet itself.

Clea said to Philippa, "I think this is the best part. The houses look like they're growing right out of the planet itself."

"Because we built them," said Philippa. The long-billed cap obscured her features, but for once Clea heard real satisfaction in the Alphorionite's normally unrevealing voice.

The top of the dome closed over. Zach Yamoto yelled, "She's up!" and the watchers cheered.

"Good work, team," said Anne Markey, the Building Materials specialist for the housing project. She ran a hand through her short, light-brown hair, and glanced up at the sun. "Let's start running line for number two; we've got sixteen frames to wire and feed before we make our quota, and the day isn't getting any younger."

Paul Riedel had worked as hard all day as anybody else in the colony. Not until after the end of lateshift did he manage to slip away from his family and into the Research dome. When he got there, Dr. Petrov was already shutting down for the night.

"You don't have to put in any study-time today, Paul," the geophysicist said. "I expect Construction had you out hauling silanna along with everybody else. You're probably tired already."

"Not really, Dr. Petrov," said Paul. "All I did was fill boxes over in Central Stores. They want all the new houses to have a week's food on hand before the settlers move in."

"That's a nice touch," Dr. Petrov said. "When I came down with the first team, we had to set everything up from scratch. I remember we lived on space rations for six months before we got the hydroponics going."

"Yes, sir," said Paul absently—the geophysicist tended to reminisce at length whenever anything diverted his attention from scientific work. "But all this construction going up gave me some ideas. I want to take a quick look at that simulation I was running."

"The one on weather patterns?" Dr. Petrov smiled. "Well, you've worked hard all day, so I suppose you're entitled to a little enjoyment on the side. Shut the lab down when you're through; you know the drill."

The geophysicist went out. Paul sat down at the terminal and called up the simulation.

A few minutes later he pushed his chair back and frowned at the monitor. The top of the split screen held the molecular diagram of silanna

grown over charged fields by normal means during normal conditions. The bottom screen showed the same material grown during periods of ionic disturbance.

Still frowning, Paul added a stress to the two simulated sheets of building material. The computer obliged by illustrating the result, while running off numerical data in an on-screen window to the right. He added a little more shear-vector, and the block of silanna in the lower window crumbled as he watched.

The silanna doesn't set during ionic disturbances, he thought. *At least not during disturbances like the ones we're getting around here. If the theory holds, that is.*

He wiped the screen, and then displayed the previous day's graph, superimposed on a representation of today's conditions. He regarded the result with dismay. The ionic buildup had been even more rapid than he had expected.

"If the theory holds," he said aloud, "and the new houses aren't setting properly—then we're going to have a big problem. In less than a day."

CHAPTER TEN

High Winds

With a roar of jets, the heavy-cargo shuttle from Gauguin's orbital station started its glidepath down through the atmosphere to the Ambora Spaceport Complex. The permanent surface-to-orbit elevator system connecting Gauguin with its artificial satellite wasn't big enough to land a shipment of almost two hundred colonists, their luggage, and their household goods. Instead, the settlers' first glimpse of their new home would come through patchy clouds, while their orbit-to-atmosphere spacecraft took a buffeting from the gusting east wind.

Inside the main hall of the spaceport—cleared of cargo for the occasion—the official meet-and-greet party heard the approaching sound of jets and started forming up for the colonists' arrival. Sean Matthews, wearing his good clothes, stood with his parents in the receiving line and wished he could be elsewhere.

"This is stupid," he muttered. "What in the world do people just out of cold sleep need with pink punch and little pale sandwiches?"

"Absolutely nothing," said his father. "But it lets them know they're welcome, and it keeps them all in one place while Transport unloads their baggage."

Outside, the noise of jets had died—the shuttle had set down onto the pavement. Sean jammed his hands into his pockets and scowled at the loaded buffet table.

"I suppose I'm here to prove that Ambora's actually got living, breathing teenagers," he said.

"That's exactly what you're here for," said his mother. "So stop sulking and try to look alive."

Down at the far end of the hall, the huge cargo doors grated open. Through the widening gap, Sean saw the blunt, winged shape of the shuttle. The transport craft's ramp came down, and the new colonists began to emerge—one or two at first, and then a steadily lengthening line. They looked small and uncertain against the hulking shuttle.

Sean took his hands out of his pockets and stood up a little straighter. He thought back to what his father had said the other morning at breakfast, that most colonists came from cities of the inner worlds.

No wonder they're feeling nervous, he thought. *They've probably never seen this much open space before in their lives. And two cities-—towns, really—don't look like much next to a whole empty planet.*

But before he could brood on that any further, the leader of the incoming colonists had reached the reception line, and Governor Matthews-after a surreptitious glance at the man's nametag—was beginning the little speech he would have made at least once per arriving family before the day was over.

"Welcome to Gauguin, Mr. Paredes. I'm Governor Matthews, and this is my wife Alison and my son Sean...."

By early evening, things had calmed down somewhat. Half the arriving colonists, along with their personal effects, had been pot aboard the overland transports for Gandria, and the others had been shown to their houses in Ambora.

On late drudge shift at the Power Dome, Zach and Arkady watched the computers in charge of switching in the load to the new residential areas and feeding the transport sections. When the crew for the next shift arrived, the two boys turned over the Power Use log and signed out of the dome. Barring major trouble with the power systems, their drudge was over until tomorrow.

Overhead in the night sky, the twin moons were almost full, with Justine about to pass in front of Juliette. The wind that had blown all day snatched at the boys' hair and clothes as soon as they stepped outside. Arkady frowned as he felt the strength of the gusts.

"It's really picking up," he said. "I don't think I've ever felt wind this strong here before."

"Me, neither," said Zach.

Together, they made their way toward the residential section of Ambora. The wind rose higher as they walked, carrying with it gritty particles that hit their exposed skin and eyes with stinging force. Squinting, heads bent, Zach and Arkady reached the bridge over the Tati River. In the yellow light of the glowglobes lining the arch, the wind-borne

particles glittered as they flew past.

"Sand," said Arkady, in disgust. "That's all we need. By tomorrow morning this whole town's going to feel like my shoes did after the beach party."

Zach shook his head. "This isn't ordinary sand. It's leftover silanna dust from all that new construction."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Ever since we got word about the settlers coming in, when I haven't been hauling this stuff around I've been cleaning it up."

"Well," said Arkady, "I think you missed a little."

Throughout the night, the wind rose. Will Mornette, studying late in his room, heard the gale howling and beating against the silanna shell of the house. The sound put the domeworlder's nerves on edge; the turbulent air of Gauguin had never seemed so noisy before. Doggedly, he put his hands over his ears and tried to concentrate on the terminal and monitor in front of him.

Suddenly, the image on the monitor flickered. The lights in the Riedel-Mornette household dimmed and came back up.

On Acedium, a sag like that meant something was wrong at the power plant. And without power, the world would go back to darkness and vacuum. The responses fostered by sixteen years as a domeworlder don't change overnight—Will sprang to his feet, knocking over his chair in his haste, and got halfway to the front door before he remembered that he wasn't on Acedium's Reactor Watch Team any longer.

Rather than admit his mistake, he continued at a more sedate pace to the door. Once there, he paused for a second—the wind outside hadn't slackened in the last few minutes; in fact it seemed to be blowing even harder than before— and then palmed the lockplate.

The door slid open. Will stood, clinging to the edges of the doorway to brace himself against the force of the wind, and stared out, appalled, into the night.

The power dip showed at the Davidov household as well. Arkady closed down his study terminal, shouted "I'm heading over to the Power Dome!" for the benefit of whoever might be within earshot, and dashed out of the house.

What he saw as the front door closed behind him almost stopped him in his tracks. Silanna dust blew through the streets of Ambora's residential sector in whirling, stinging sheets, driven like rain on the wind. Overhead, Justine and Juliette shone between patchy clouds that scudded across the night sky.

By the fitful, mauve-tinged moonlight, Arkady watched a sheet of silanna disengage itself from a new-built dome. The loose material tore free and blew across town, disintegrating as it went. Behind it, the framework of now-bare wiring collapsed,

lighting up the night with blue-white sparks before the circuit breakers took that part of the power grid off-line. Through the flashes of light, Arkady spotted Zach heading downhill toward him. The other boy shouted something as he ran, and pointed toward the collapsing dome.

"They can handle it at Power without us," Zach called as he caught up with Arkady. "But down there—those are all new colonists."

Arkady looked eastward. More flashes of blue-white fire crackled against the sand-filled air.

"You're right," he said, starting out again at a fast trot. "The old domes to the west and north look pretty stable; let's get people moving in that direction if we can."

Will Mornette stood looking out at the storm with horror and something close to awe. Nothing he'd ever experienced on Acedium had prepared him for destruction on such a scale. *It was like this in the holotheater,* he thought, still grasping the doorframe in both hands to keep from being blown away. *The wind, and all the domes collapsing ...*

A squad of unhuman soldiers trotted down the street. Will shook his head. When he looked again, they were gone.

Halfway to the new domes, Arkady and Zach saw their first refugee.

"Get uphill to the old town!" Zach shouted to the figure emerging from the clouds of wind-driven dust.

The man strode up to them, mauve moonlight glittering off the gold of his buttons and epaulettes. His face was unhuman—flat and lipless, with oval amber eyes.

"Do you not know me?" he demanded. "I am Ney!"

The amber-eyed stranger turned away, not waiting for an answer, and vanished. Arkady and Zach stared at each other.

"Zach, did you see that?"

"I saw it," said Zach slowly. "But I didn't believe it."

"Saw saw seesaw," came a theskie's harsh voice from the dark nearby. "Leaving is believing, league relief."

Arkady glanced in the theskie's direction. The intermittent moonlight showed the feather-scaled creature looking fixedly at the point where the stranger had vanished.

Alone in the Bidding house, Philippa watched the lights in the main living-space go dim. A few seconds later, she felt the intense awareness of a few nights ago return: somehow, she knew that Zach and Arkady were moving farther away from her, heading downhill at a run.

She went to the window, and saw a night sky full of silanna dust. Periodic flares of blue-white sparks lit up the scene, as one building or another among the new domes collapsed

and gave up its skin to the gale.

Philippa's anger rose at the sight. / *worked hard on those houses,* she thought. She clenched one hand into a fist and felt her fingernails cut into her palm. / *finally got a chance to accomplish something real and useful... and now the wind is tearing it apart while I watch.*

She turned away from the window. On her way to the front door, she picked up the scarf she'd worn the day before to work on the high wiring, and tied the square of silk tightly around her head. Then she went out into the night.

The wind hit her as soon as she stepped through the door, making her glad she'd thought to bind up her hair. Silanna dust from the crumbling buildings struck her face and arms with scouring force as she ran downhill. For a moment she seemed to see a cybertank looming up out of the dark in front of her, its mindwhip cannon glowing blue—then the shape dissolved into the shadow of a dome, curiously illuminated by the ragged moonlight. She ran on.

Her peculiar internal compass was still with her, telling her that Zach and Arkady had already reached the new housing. She let the intuition guide her, running through the dark and the wind-blown sand, until she passed through a half-dissolved archway and found herself inside a broken shell that had once been a house.

Chunks of fallen silanna crunched under her feet. She went on forward, and almost tripped over Zach Yamoto where he knelt among the scraps of broken wiring, a small girl crying helplessly in his arms. A few feet away, Arkady Davidov was helping the child's parents dig through the rubble of their recent home.

Zach looked up as she approached. The light of the twin moons shone down for a moment through a break in the flying clouds, and Philippa saw that his face was streaked with dirt and tears.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked.

"Looking for some way to help," she said. "Why don't you and Arkady start bringing people uphill to my place?"

"Your parents won't be upset?" Zach's tones held a mixture of doubt and hope.

"My parents?" Philippa laughed—a little wildly, but she doubted Zach would notice. "They're both away in Gandria. What the loco doesn't tell them, they'll never even know."

"Great!" said Zach, something of the old enthusiasm coming back into his voice. He stood up,

carrying the little girl in both arms. "Let's go, Arkady. We've got these folks a place for the night."

Paul Riedel looked out the window of the Riedel-Mornette family dome, watching the

destruction of the new housing area. In the main living-space behind him, his parents and Will were working to bed down the family of five that Clea Tourni had led through the windstorm to their doorstep. Paul, however, had other things on his mind.

"Well, what do you know," he said to himself with a kind of grim satisfaction. "The theory held."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Blackout

Next morning, the sun shone down out of a sky that looked like it had been scrubbed clean overnight. The twin moons were riding low in the west, a pair of pale disks out over the Kartai Sea. Clea Tourni stepped away from her bedroom window and began to dress. The clothes she'd worn during the storm last night lay in a heap near the foot of her bed, little drifts of silanna dust collected in their folds.

She slipped on a pair of clean shoes and headed for the breakfast table. The family of new settlers they'd taken in sometime after midnight had disappeared again; only stacks of cushions and folded blankets in the main living-space remained to show where they had slept. When she reached the dining nook, she was glad to find her father still there, pouring himself a glass of fruit juice.

"What a night," she said, sliding into a chair. "Where is everybody?"

"Things got pretty exciting for a while there," agreed Dr. Tourni. He filled a second glass with juice and handed it to her. "And as for your question: have you looked at the light yet?"

Clea drank her fruit juice at a gulp and held out her glass. "More, please? Thanks; 1 still feel dried out from all that wind.... it's brighter outside than usual, if that's what you mean."

Dr. Tourni chuckled. "It's brighter than usual, all right. That's because it's later than usual."

Ciea set the second glass of fruit juice down so hard it sloshed. "Oh, no! I'm going to miss school! Dad, why didn't you wake me up? I'm going to get jugged again, I know I am...."

"Calm down, Clea," said her father, mopping up the spilled juice with a napkin. "No classes today. Central Planning's cut power to non-essentials, and when the school went off-line it took your terminal's alarm clock with it."

Clea relaxed a little and reached for the toast. "Nobody tried to wake me up?"

"Honey," said her father, "you slept right through seven people eating breakfast in relays,

so I figured you could use the rest."

"Guess you were right," she said with a grin. "It must have been almost dawn before everything got sorted out over in new housing." She paused, remembering the devastation. "What *was* new housing, that is."

"You did well, Clea," said Dr. Tourni. "All the colony's young people did. I'm proud of you."

Clea felt herself blushing. "Thanks," she mumbled around a bite of toast. "So what's going on if there's no school?"

"Well," said her father, "most of the kids are out working at the Power Dome."

"I think I'll head over in that direction, then." Clea took another slice of toast. "After breakfast."

When she went outside, the sun overhead shone hot and blue, and everywhere colors appeared achingly vivid in the aftermath of the storm. Evidence of last night's disaster lay all about. White sand had piled up in little drifts along the sides of all the buildings—the same sand Clea had watched forming into silanna shells only two days ago. An uncanny quietness filled the city of Ambora; no robots cruised the lanes and bridges, and no students laughed and chattered on their way to school or drudge.

Somewhere far off, she could hear the sound of a hoverscooter, moving away from her. All the colony's vehicles had independent power packs; they could continue in operation for some time without recharging. Just about everything else in the colony, though, depended on the powergrid for energy. Clea realized for the first time how fragile that energy source actually was and felt cold in spite of the hot sun.

She reached the Power Dome, and found only one technician on duty. "Where is everybody?" she asked.

"Out on the gridfield," he answered.

"Sweeping off. The whole thing's covered with sand. You volunteering to help?"

She nodded. "School's canceled."

"Get out there, then, and grab a broom from somebody who's heading off-shift."

Clea went out to the edge of the gridfield—an expanse of solar collectors that provided the colony with most of its power. The flat black plates stretched for a kilometer or more in either direction. The collectors closest to the Dome were already clear of drifted sand; only thin white lines remained to show where it had been swept away. Farther off, Clea could make out a group of workers. She headed out toward them on the narrow metal catwalk that ran above the fragile solar plates.

As she drew closer she recognized the workers as her friends from the Bradbury School. "About time you showed up," Zach called as she approached.

"I overslept," she said. "Anybody got a spare broom?"

"Have mine," said Zach with a jaw-cracking yawn. He climbed up onto the catwalk, still yawning, and added, "I haven't been home since the action started last night."

He handed over the long-handled cleaning tool, and stepped out of the padded shoes that the cleaning crew wore to prevent damage to the cells as they walked across them. Clea slipped on the gridshoes and climbed down to the field.

She waved good-bye to Zach as he started back toward town and then joined the others at work. "I saw some strange stuff last night," she said after a while.

Nobody looked surprised.

"We all did," said Philippa Bidding. "Tell us what you saw first."

"It was strange," Clea began. "You know how it was—all the sparks from the wiring, and the clouds, and sand flying everywhere—and somewhere in there I started seeing things that couldn't possibly be real. Things from the holovids at school, the ones they told us we didn't see ... things like we saw before in the city on the plateau—"

"But not exactly the same," Philippa cut in. "It's more like what we saw in the storm was *related* to what was on the plateau."

"If only we could figure out how," Arkady said.

The others nodded.

"What I want to know is where is all this coming from?" Will said slowly. "As long as it was just the holovids, there was always a chance it was somebody messing with the simulations."

Arkady shook his head, frowning. "I guarantee you, nobody was showing holovids last night."

Clea swept the last of the sand off one bank of solar plates and started on the next one. The broom left wide black streaks in the drifted silanna. "Up on the plateau," she said, "it was a message. Maybe this is, too."

"At least the stuff on the plateau made some kind of sense," protested Sean. "This is ... is ..."

"Gibberish," supplied Philippa. The Alphorionite looked thoughtful. "That doesn't mean it's not a message, though."

"Garbled transmission," agreed Arkady.

"Yes," said Clea. "But from *who?"*

The five discussed the matter all morning as they pushed away the drifted sand and the sun grew higher in the sky, but they came no closer to a solution.

By the next day the solar grid was clean, and the Bradbury School reopened. Most of the

students—eager to see who had arrived on the settler ship—got there early. The group from Transition Sector proved no exception. When Sean Matthews joined the crowd outside the door, only one of their number was still missing.

"Where's Arkady this morning?" Sean asked. "It's not like him to be late."

"He's probably got a house full of strange people to get fed breakfast and sent to the right buildings," said Clea. "We've got three of them staying over at our place."

"Don't brag," said Will Mornette. "At our house, we've got five."

"At your house you've also got a spare bedroom," the Galahadan pointed out.

Zach Yamoto laughed. "Easy, easy. Here comes the Thetan Terror now—and oh, my, just look at what he's got with him."

Sean looked. The new girl was tall and thin, with a lithe, muscular frame and an easy way of

walking. But the first thing that Sean had noticed—the first thing, he suspected, that anyone looking at her would notice—was her hair: straight, hip-length, and pure magenta. The brilliant rose-purple color made a striking contrast with the gray of her eyes and the creamy tan of her skin.

"Good morning, everyone," Arkady said. "I'd like to introduce Miss Daphne DeVries. She's staying with my family—and she's in our class."

At the end of the school day, Sean started out for his drudge assignment. He was halfway across the plaza when Zach Yamoto caught up with him.

"Hey, Sean! Wait up, would you? I have an idea."

Sean slowed his pace. "What is it this time?" he asked.

"I got to thinking during math class."

Sean looked at his friend in mock amazement. "That has to be a first."

"Not about math, you toroid. About Daphne." Zach paused. "You know—new girl, thin, purple hair?"

"I know," said Sean. "What about her?"

"Suppose we were to go swimming again," Zach said. "And suppose we were to invite her to come along."

"Well," said Sean, "it would certainly 'make our new neighbor feel like part of the community' as my parents are fond of saying. The truth

is, you're itching to try out those new surfboards of yours."

Zach grinned at him. "Caught. I confess it. Anyway, if I did arrange a surfing party, would you come?"

"After missing the last suicide mission? Are you crazy?"

"Not so it shows," said Zach, still grinning. "Would you ask Clea to see if she's interested?"

"Next time I see her, sure," said Sean, looking away.

Zach fixed him with an uncomfortably penetrating gaze. "You mean you won't be meeting her in about two point five minutes? This isn't the Sean Matthews I used to know."

"Some things change." Sean hesitated for a moment and then made up his mind. "Tell me, Zach—everybody talks to you about everything. So what is it with Philippa?"

Zach blinked. "Hold on there. You're telling me you're going out with Philippa now?"

"No, not really," said Sean. He shook his head, puzzled. "But my dad keeps warning me about her. He won't say so out loud, but I don't think he wants her to be my girlfriend—which might make sense if she were, but she's not."

"Sounds juicy," opined Zach. "A scandal on her last world, perhaps? A hot and heavy romance that went out of control? Oh, the passion, the tears, the sweet, lingering farewells! Sadder but wiser...."

Sean grimaced. "You've been watching too many episodes of *The Innocence of Sylvia.* Home holoviewing rots the mind."

And besides, he thought, *transition-level romances don't get put onto the locked levels of galactic databases. No matter how passionate.*

He shook his head again. "Anyhow, Zach—am I making any sense at all?"

"Would you still be my friend if I told you the truth?" asked Zach. "Take my advice and forget about it. Girls are weird."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Girl from Nueva Ipanema

Somewhat to everybody's surprise, the surfing party happened later that same afternoon. The weather was fair, the tide was going out, and— most importantly—all drudge had been canceled after the extra work so many of the teens had put in during the storm and its aftermath.

Twenty minutes after the cancellation notice went up, Zach Yamoto had the gang collected. Ten minutes after that, the two hovercars belonging to the Matthews and Yamoto families pulled up on the headland overlooking Sanjo Bay.

The teens piled out and descended the cliff by their usual breakneck method. Daphne

DeVries's gray eyes widened as she glanced from the rap-pelling lines to the sheer drop, but she said nothing and made the trip down without a bobble.

That left only Zach and Sean at the top of the cliff.

Didn't I tell you?" said Zach as they prepared for their own descent. "This girl is somebody we want to know."

They joined the others on the beach under the cliff. Out beyond the black sand, the waves curled in, high and smooth.

"Do people swim where you come from?" Philippa asked Daphne DeVries.

The new girl took off her short terry-cloth gym robe and revealed a bathing suit the same shade of bright magenta as her hair. "Absolutely," she said. "Haven't you ever heard of Nueva Ipanema?"

"That's a town someplace, isn't it?" asked Philippa with a well-bred half-smile.

The girl from Felicidad flipped her long hair back over her shoulders and produced a smile just as wordly and sophisticated. "A beach, actually. On the biggest lake on Felicidad. I got this swimsuit there just before we left."

Will Mornette had scarcely taken his *eyes otf* the new girl since she'd set foot on the beach. Now he spoke up for the first time. "It's a very nice swimsuit."

"And you're very gallant to say so." The Felicidadena swept Will a low curtsey, her effort totally unimpaired by the lack of flowing skirts to sweep with. Will blushed.

"You know about swimming," said Zach hastily. "That's good. But are you ready to try surfing?"

"Sure," said Daphne. "What is it?"

"Maybe nothing," said Arkady Davidov. "We haven't run the field tests yet."

"Pessimist," said Zach.

But the surfboards did float, in spite of Arkady's skepticism. Soon the teens were trying to stand up and ride the breakers in imitation of the surfers in Zach's flatvid. Most of them promptly fell off again, and after a couple of tries contented themselves with paddling about and using the surfboards as oversized flotation devices. But Sean persisted, and after several attempts actually succeeded in staying upright for a brief ride.

Farther up on the beach, the rest of the group had already congregated around an open cooler full of snacks. Eventually, Sean hauled his surfboard out of the water and joined them, dropping down onto the warm sand with the others. Clea and Philippa warmed up enough toward Daphne to start a detailed and enthusiastic three-way comparison of fashion developments on Galahad, Alphorion, and Felicidad.

"They call it a follicle treatment," Daphne explained when Clea inquired about her

magenta hair. "It's the latest thing back home. I got mine done just before I left."

"How long does it stay on?" asked Clea.

"Until you go back to the salon for a reversal," Daphne said. She produced a chartreuse scarf from the pocket of her gym robe and tied her wet hair back with a huge, floppy bow.

Will Mornette was still regarding the new girl's

flamboyant tresses with badly concealed fascination. "I don't think," he said, "that Ambora's got any people who can do that sort of thing."

"It doesn't," said Philippa.

"Oh, dear," said Daphne, although Sean thought she sounded more pleased than upset by the news. "My father will be disappointed. He still hopes I'll change the color back."

"What about your mother?" asked Will.

"She didn't come with us to Gauguin," said Daphne. "She's touring."

"Touring?" asked Sean.

"With a theatrical company," explained Daphne. She gave him a pitying look. "Haven't you heard of Sybilla Wentworth?"

"No," said Arkady. "Is that her real name?"

"Of course not," said Daphne. "That's her *professional* name. She's an actress."

"In the holovids?" Zach asked.

The new girl's gray eyes flashed. *"Definitely* not the holovids," she said with distaste, as if Zach had suggested something sleazy. "The stage is the only real theater."

"Maybe so," said Arkady. "But right now on Gauguin, hoiovids are what we've got."

"Can't your theater convert to live stage?" asked Daphne.

Everybody looked at Sean—his mother, after all, had designed most of the colony's public buildings. Sean shrugged. "You'd have to ask jannie Tereriff," he said. "She's the theater manager."

Daphne frowned a little. "Is the theater that big dome near the school?"

"That's Research," said Sean. "We can show you where the theater is, though, and introduce you to Ms. Tereriff."

Zach looked out at the waters of Sanjo Bay, higher now than they had been a few minutes earlier. "Right now it's time we all got back to town. The tide's starting to come in."

After eating dinner at the Yamotos', Zach and Sean stopped by the Davidov household to pick up Arkady, who was just coming out the door, a packet of tapes in his hand.

Sean raised one eyebrow. "New tapes?" he asked.

Zach looked curious. "As the younger Yamotos would say, no fair not sharing."

"They're not that kind of tape," said Arkady. "And I have to have them back here by endshift."

"Sounds hot," Zach teased.

"I told you they weren't that kind of tape," said Arkady impatiently. "We can talk about it on the way to the theater. ... Here comes Daffy now."

"Daffy?" asked Sean, as the Felicidadena made her apearance.

"That's me," said Daphne, doffing her hat and bowing. The hat had a broad brim and sported a long, bright green, and somewhat wind-battered plume. "Arkady invited me along."

Together, the four strolled through the residential area toward the theater. Daffy's green plume bobbed in the wind that came off the eastern hills.

Sean fixed Arkady with an expectant gaze. "All right," he said to the Thetan. "Talk."

"You have to promise not to tell anyone," said Arkady.

"I promise," said Sean.

Zach nodded. "Me, too."

"My lips are sealed," said Daphne.

"Okay," said Arkady. "These are neighborhood security tapes from two nights ago. My father got them for me."

"What do you want security tapes for?" asked Zach.

Arkady glanced over at Daphne, and then said. "I want to see if the stuff we saw during the storm shows up on tape."

"Good move," said Zach. "I should have thought of that."

"What kind of stuff?" Daphne asked. "All I saw was our new house turning into a sandpile."

"That's probably all we'll get off the tapes, too," Sean predicted. "The other things... if they show up, you'll see what we mean."

Daphne didn't seem too pleased with his answer, but she didn't make a fuss about it either, which was a definite point in her favor. Soon all four were packed into one of the private projection rooms at the holovid theater. Arkady lifted a sleeping quufer off the viewing tank, then switched the tank on and set the playback for two-dimensional mode. He slipped in a tape and started the machine running.

The first tape showed the main plaza of Ambora, with the twin moons high in the sky, and a few grains of sand being carried on the wind. In the upper right corner of the image, a time-stamp ticked off the passing seconds.

"This could take forever," said Zach.

"It's running in real-time right now," Sean said. "Can't you speed it up, Arkady?"

"Sure." The Thetan fiddled with the playback controls. The numbers on the time-stamp began to blur. On screen, the grains of sand whipped up into a blinding dust storm. People appeared: refugees from the dissolving houses, heading uphill toward shelter. The tape ended as the sun rose over Ambora.

"Nothing on that one," said Zach. "Try the street we took on our way to the new town. If we find something anywhere, we'll find it there."

Arkady looked through the tapes, and put another one into the machine. A few seconds later, a street scene appeared in the tank. He let it run at double speed for a bit, then slowed it down. "This is it."

The four teens watched as small two-dimensional images of Zach and Arkady ran down the sand-filled lane, paused, looked at each other, and then ran on. Arkady switched off the machine. "Nothing," he said disgustedly. "We must be going crazy. It's the only explanation."

"Then what was that animal staring at?" asked Daphne.

Arkady looked at the Felicidadena. "You mean the theskie?"

"If that's what you call that thing with feathers and teeth," she said. "Didn't you see the way it moved its head and eyes? It was watching something."

"Replay the tape, Arkady," said Sean. "Okay, everybody, this time keep your eyes on the theskie."

The replay still didn't show any mysterious visions roaming about the streets—but the theskie's gaze was plainly following something the camera hadn't seen. Sean turned and looked at Daphne with new respect. "How did you notice that?"

"I'm going to be an actress," said Daphne. "Live theater, like my mother. I've trained myself to notice what the audience is watching."

"So there really was something," said Arkady, with satisfaction. "It just didn't record."

Sean nodded. "Like the city on the plateau. That didn't record on the robot probes, either — but we all saw it."

"And nobody believed us," Zach pointed out. "Do you really want to try convincing people with an argument based on the look in a theskie's eye?"

"City?" said Daphne. "What city?"

Sean ignored her. Something was working its way to the surface of his mind, as if watching the

theskie's behavior had jarred it loose—a memory of the strange, irresistible call that had come to the six of them up on the high plateau.

Come ... see .. . Someone must bear witness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

'Up the Airy Mountain, Down the Rushy Glen . . ."

The next morning, Sean arrived at the Motor Transport repair yard to find Zach already there waiting for him.

"I got your message," said Zach. "So here I am, your faithful and obedient et cetera. Just what are we doing, anyway?"

"Let's wait until Arkady gets here," said Sean. "I don't want to have to explain everything twice. In the meantime, help me warm up a couple of these hoverscooters."

"Sure. Mind telling me what our excuse is for messing with them?"

"Operational checks," Sean replied. "It's all part of the Planned Maintenance Subsystem."

"You mean you're getting credit for community service out of this jaunt?" asked Zach. "That's corrosive."

"Don't worry about it," Sean told him. "I've already put you and Arkady down as assistants."

Zach looked at Sean in admiration. "That is what I call planning. In fact, I'm almost ashamed I didn't think of it myself."

"Being friends with the techies at the yard helps a lot," Sean explained with a grin. "Those people have shown me some tricks that you wouldn't believe. Did you know you can bounce one of these things almost sixty meters if you take the regulator off?"

"I thought that was illegal."

"'Operation of ground counter-gravitational personnel support vehicles without all required safety equipment' isn't really illegal," said Sean.

Zach raised a skeptical eyebrow. "It isn't?"

"No," Sean told him. "It's against regulations. There's a distinction."

"But not much difference," said Zach with a laugh. "Come on, let's get started."

Working together, the two boys soon had both of the hoverscooters ready to run. Arkady

Davidov, however, still hadn't appeared, and the sun was rising higher in the sky. Finally, Sean gave up. "We can't wait all day," he said, and switched on his scooter.

Zach followed suit, and the hoverscooters purred into life. Sean steered toward the gate of the yard.

"Stop! Halt! Wait for me!" shouted a voice behind them.

Sean turned and saw Daphne DeVries running toward them, covering the ground in long, leaping strides. In one hand she carried a small lunch-cooler; with the other hand she held onto the crown of her hat.

Today the Felicidadena wore a narrow-brimmed, round-topped tropical sun helmet. Zach Yamoto's eyes widened at the sight, and Sean could tell that his friend was experiencing a moment of pure envy. *He's finally run into somebody who's even crazier than he is,* thought Sean with some amusement as Daphne caught up with the idling hoverscooters.

"Arkady can't make it," she said, skidding to a stop beside Zach's scooter. "So I said I should come and take notes."

"What happened to Arkady?" Sean asked; Zach was still busy regarding Daphne's new hat with mute admiration.

Daphne handed up the cooler to the silent Zach. "He had to stick around the house and help his father with a repair job," she said as she pulled a long silk scarf out of one pocket and tied the hat down firmly on her head. "He said to tell you it was payback for the tapes last night."

Sean nodded. That sounded like Josef Davidov's style. The elder Thetan didn't care much about formalities, but neither did he believe that anything out of the ordinary should come without its price attached.

"Okay," Sean said. Sending her back right now would raise suspicions, and besides he didn't mind her company. "Hop up behind me and let's go."

Daphne climbed onto the rear of the hover-scooter, and once again Sean nudged the vehicle into action. With Daphne sitting behind him on top of the cargo compartment, and Zach paralleling him a meter or so off on the second scooter, he set a course inland and away from the settlement.

"So where are we going?" Zach asked, over the hum of the scooters.

"I'll know when I get there," Sean replied.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Daphne asked from her seat behind him.

"It means," Sean said, "that I'm basing this on something I saw only once, and that most people think I imagined anyway—plus a feeling I got yesterday when we were watching those tapes. There's something out here that we have to see."

"He means he doesn't know where we're going," Zach translated.

"Don't be a total toroid," said Sean. "I checked the scans before I left, and this area's got some nice picnic spots. So we'll have something to do anyway."

The hoverscooters droned on, taking them eastward past the outskirts of Ambora and out into the countryside. Their route led over open grassland, which the vehicles covered with little problem. Sean used his scooter's inertial navpack to guide his course: the device showed bearing and range to target, bearing and range to base, and the time/energy/speed requirements for arrival at a given place at a given moment.

Before long, the rolling grassland gave way to scattered copses of trees with mountains visible on the horizon. About noon, the three teens stopped for lunch. They had reached the first foothills of the distant Catalan Mountains; the slopes were steeper here, and the trees thicker. A pack of wild theskies hunted in the distance.

So far, nothing had appeared to bear out Sean's hunch that something important was waiting for them here in the hills. Privately, he had already resolved to declare the expedition a failure and head back as soon as they'd eaten. The wind had picked up a bit, and the sky in the east had a hazy look that he didn't like at all.

"I'd say we're in for some weather pretty soon," Zach commented as he passed out the cartons of Gauguin Punch.

Daphne gave a nervous glance skyward. "Weather?" she said. "You mean like the other night?"

Sean hastened to reassure her. "That was just a fluke—it won't happen again. But even an ordinary rainstorm's no fun if you're stuck out in it, so we'd better head back after lunch. If the lost cities of the ancients are out here waiting for us, they can wait for another day."

Daphne didn't say anything more about the storm, but Sean noticed that she kept on glancing at the clouds. All three teens ate their sandwiches without wasting any more time. Lunch finished, they put the cooler back into the cargo compartment of Zach's scooter, and made ready to

depart. Sean was reaching for the starter switch when he heard Daphne's tense voice.

"Look over there."

He followed her pointing finger, and saw a feathery reptilian creature, almost the height of a man, standing on a nearby ridge. "Oh, that. It's just a wild theskie."

"They're friendly, honest," said Zach. "You'll have to come by my house when we get back and meet Admiral."

Daphne didn't look convinced. "You're sure they're friendly?"

As she spoke, the theskie on the ridge lifted its head and gave a long, raucous cry—a sound far different from the imitation of human speech that the city theskies used.

"Well, most of them are friendly," Sean said. "But this one doesn't act like it's been around people before."

"Maybe we're on its territory," said Daphne, "and it wants us to go back."

Sean switched on his hoverscooter. "Okay, I'm agreeable—we were leaving anyway. Be ready to make some time, people; it's getting pretty late."

"Later than you think," said Zach, and something in his tone made Sean's skin prickle. "Take a look around you."

Sean complied. In the few seconds since Daphne had sighted the first theskie, the creature had been joined by over a score of its brethren. With their markings of dappled brown and white,

they were hard to spot in the shadows beneath the trees, but they were there and inching steadily forward.

"I think," said Daphne, in a voice so carefully casual that Sean wondered when she'd had a chance to rehearse it, "I *think* that they've got us surrounded."

"Don't worry," said Zach. "These colony scooters aren't your inner-planet neighborhood gadabouts."

Sean shook his head. "I think taking it low and slow is going to be a better idea. We don't want to run down one of the theskies, even by accident."

"You're the boss," said Zach, and started the scooter.

Side by side, the two vehicles bounced gently a few centimeters above the surface of the ground. They started gliding forward—slowly at first, and then faster.

"Easy," cautioned Sean. "Not too fast. We don't want to hurt anybody."

But the ring of theskies parted as the scooters advanced. At the same time, the lean, sharp-toothed animals drew in closer on either side. Other theskies came up behind the scooters, keeping pace without effort on their long hind legs, so that the pack was trotting in a loose U, with the two scooters at the center.

"Stick close," Sean said to Zach. "And keep moving."

They descended from the hills, still with their escort. Once down on the grasslands, Sean indicated a direction off to the right. "Home's that way. Let's go."

He turned his scooter, but the theskies on that side drew closer together, and wouldn't open to let him pass. "All right, I won't go that way," Sean said. "Let's try a little more speed."

He twisted the acceleration control, and the scooter surged forward. Zach accelerated along with him. The theskies picked up their pace, and stayed level. Sean added speed. The theskies kept up easily, and one of the reptilian creatures opened its jaws to show him its teeth. It howled with a harsh, wordless noise.

"That does it," Sean said to Zach. "Maybe the theskies in town are tame, but I don't like the way these are behaving. When I give the word, point your scooter for daylight and push the accelerator over to redline."

And hope we get up to max speed before the theskies can catch us, he added to himself. / *wish I knew a way to get at those regulators without stopping the scooter first. ...*

"Wait a minute," said Daphne from behind him. "I have a crazy feeling these theskies are trying to tell us something."

"Yeah," called Zach from the other scooter. "They're saying 'Settler, go home.'"

Sean frowned. "No, they're not. We tried going home and they didn't like it."

"So?" asked Zach. "Now what?"

Sean thought for a moment. "I say we follow the theskies—at least for right now."

The pack of theskies and the two scooters continued in the new direction for several minutes, until the grassland once again began to be broken by isolated clumps of trees. Some of the animals escorting the scooters sprinted ahead to complete a circle around the three friends. Then the pack began to decrease its speed, going from a run to a trot, and then to a walk; Sean and Zach slowed the scooters to match.

The theskies halted a few meters away from one of the small groves that dotted the grassland. The circle opened. Through the gap, Sean saw something dark and moundlike lying on the ground. The waiting theskies turned their heads and looked at him.

Who, me? he thought—but he could recognize a duty when it stared him in the face.

"Stay here," he said to the other two, and stepped off his hovering scooter. The pack of theskies didn't stir as he walked up to the motionless form.

He found himself staring down at the body of a dead pronghorn, one of the vegetarian herd-animals that grazed here in the high plains. But this particular herbivore hadn't died of natural causes, or even under the fangs and claws of a predatory pack of theskies. A single hole in the side, over the heart, revealed how it had been killed—and its head was missing, cut off too neatly for the killer to be anything but human.

For a moment, Sean felt physically ill. *Just killing a native life-form is against the law,* he thought. *But mutilating it afterwards—what kind of person would do a thing like that?*

"Sean!" called Zach from behind him. His friend's voice was low and urgent. "Over here."

Sean hurried back to the scooters, and found Zach pointing toward the grove. Back in the shadows among the trees, something dark and heavy-looking swung back and forth in the wind.

The hair rose on the back of Sean's neck. He didn't want to approach that ominous

hanging object, but he did. It was another pronghorn, this one hung up by its hind legs from a stout tree limb. The body had been slit open and gutted; the blood had soaked into the ground under the hanging carcass. Here, too, the pronghorn's head was missing.

"They took the heads for trophies," said Zach's voice from behind him—the other boy had left his scooter and come into the grove, with Daphne close on his heels.

"What do you mean, 'trophies'?" said Sean; and then, without waiting for an answer, "I thought I told you to stay with the scooters."

"So put me in jug for disobeying orders," said Zach without visible remorse. "People on Earth used to do it—kill animals, then stuff their heads and hang them on the walls for decoration."

"That's disgusting," said Daphne, looking pale and tight-lipped under the brim of her absurd hat.

A theskie's long, strident cry came from the

direction of the scooters as she spoke. Then the harsh speaking voice of another theskie joined in, babbling nonsense words: "My Spartan's offense is *to* tell rank, go to heaven it smells, the Spartans smell rank, tell the offense, go!"

"You heard the animal," said Sean, starting back for the scooters at a lope. "Mark these coordinates on your navpack—we have to get somebody from town out here to see this. Let's ride."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lost in the Woods

About midafternoon, Philippa Bidding left her family's house on Admin Hill and headed for the Information Resource Center, her portable terminal tucked under her arm. She didn't particularly intend to do any studying, but she did suspect that the IRC might be a good place to run into someone she knew. After two days with a house full of strangers —even well-behaved and grateful ones—she felt the need for a familiar face.

But the Center was almost empty today, and none of her particular crowd were there. With a sigh, she went into the history section and pulled out a rack of dataspools dealing with the Age of Napoleon. Locating an empty study carrel, she popped a spool into her terminal and began to read.

Close to an hour later, she looked up. Sure enough, Arkady Davidov had just entered the

Center. He glanced in her direction and came over to her carrel.

"I thought you were going exploring with Sean and Zach," she said as he drew near.

"I was," he said. "But I got tapped for some work around the house at the last minute, so Daffy went along instead."

Philippa shook her head. "I can't believe she lets people call her Daffy."

"Neither can I," said Arkady. "But she does." Unexpectedly, the Thetan grinned. "It suits her, too. She's got more crazy ideas than anyone I've ever met."

"You like her?" For some reason, Philippa found the possibility depressing.

"She's all right," said Arkady. "But if you mean, 'am I interested'—the answer is no."

Philippa was silent for a minute. Unlike a lot of people she knew, Arkady didn't become restless if the conversation lagged. *Which is one of the things I like about him,* she admitted to herself. *I've had enough of talkers.*

"So what brought you to the IRC?" she asked finally.

He shrugged. "I had a feeling one of the gang was here."

"And you were right," she said. "That sort of thing's been happening more and more lately. Have you noticed?"

"It'd be hard not to," he said. The thought seemed to make the Thetan uncomfortable,

Philippa reflected, as if things he couldn't pin down physically disturbed him.

She could sympathize. She wasn't entirely happy about her own growing ability to sense her friends' location and distance; it made her wonder just what, and how much, the unasked-for linking had told the others about her.

Her concern about the mysterious connection only appeared to make it stronger. Even now, sitting at the library carrel, she could have placed all her friends on a street map of Ambora without hesitation. Right now, two of the dots were moving. "Zach and Sean are a few kilometers out of town," she said aloud. "They're getting closer fast."

Arkady looked dubious—until Zach burst into the Center a few minutes later, with Daphne DeVries right on his heels.

"Where's Sean?" asked Philippa before Zach could speak.

"Never mind Sean," said Zach impatiently. "I can't find my father anywhere."

"He's probably at the Admin meeting," said Arkady. "It's a special session to deal with resource allocation to expanded households."

Daphne DeVries frowned. "What?"

"It means they can't figure out how to deliver the groceries," said Zach. He ran his hand through his hair so that it stood straight up in front. "Here we are, sitting on something really important, and absolutely everybody in the colony with the authority to get something done is

off behind locked doors arguing about delivery routes!"

"There's a bit more to it than that," protested Arkady. "There's—"

"Dr. Ives isn't at the meeting," Philippa cut in. "They've met at my parents' house before, and he never comes."

"Dr. Ives ..." Zach chewed on his lower lip for a second, and then nodded. "All right. How do I find him?"

"Try his office first," said Arkady. "Then his house."

"Fine," said Zach. Without another word, he was off again, with Daphne still running beside him. Arkady and Philippa looked at each other, and followed. They caught up with Zach and Daphne as the other two teens were about to leave the Center by the side door nearest the school.

"Will you please tell us what's going on?" said Philippa. "It's got to be serious, or you wouldn't be willing to bring Dr. Ives into it."

"Okay," said Zach. "Come along and I'll tell you on the way."

Outside the Center, a stiff wind whipped across the open space between the domes. Already the blue sun was sinking into the dark clouds that massed on the western horizon, and shadows lay long on the ground. As the four teens half-ran toward the Bradbury School, Zach and Daphne gave a hasty account of what had happened in the foothills above Ambora.

"So as soon as we got back to town," Zach finished, "Sean went to pick up his family's holoca-mera. Then he headed back to get some recordings, and we came here to file a report."

"Where's your scooter?" Arkady asked.

"Parked out front of the IRC," said Zach. "I drove all over town trying to find somebody to report to, and finally got a feeling I'd find somebody if I went to Information Resource."

By the time he finished speaking, they'd reached the school entrance. Together, they went inside. The halls had the same dim, echoing character they always had on freedays when the students were gone. A light shone around the cracks of Dr. Ives's office door.

Zach looked at Arkady and Philippa. "You two had better wait for us out here. If he sees so many of his old friends all at once—especially after that history class episode—he's certain to think we're pulling a fast one on him."

Far out of Ambora, in the woods near the Gandria road, a gust of wind buffeted Sean's speeding hoverscooter. The small, light vehicle skidded sideways, almost tipping over. Sean compensated and brought the scooter back upright. Checking the course-to-steer indicator, he came left a bit. *I don't like this,* he thought with a frown. *It's getting late, and the weather's turning nasty.* Another, stronger gust of wind hit the scooter. For the first time in days, the wind wasn't coming off the eastern mountains: it had started

blowing

hard from the north on his way back to Ambora with Zach and Daphne, and now it had veered again to come at him even harder from the west.

Sean gave the scooter a little more speed. He'd had it almost up to redline earlier, pushing the vehicle hard in order to reach the slaughter site before sunset, but that had been over open ground. Here, the heavy underbrush slowed his progress. He wished he dared take off the regulators and lift the scooter clear, but that trick was a good way to burn out the entire motor. *I can't risk it,* he thought. *Not this far from home, and in bad weather.*

He made as much speed as he could, heading eastward across the darkening landscape. Behind him, to the west, storm clouds gathered over the city and obscured the setting sun. The wind whipped up even higher, bringing with it a cold and driving rain.

The course Sean had set upon leaving Ambora for the second time took him through the forest close by the Gandria rOad—a more direct route to the slaughter site, he'd thought, than the two-legs-of-a-triangle journey they'd made under the guidance of the theskies. But when he reached the thick woods, he began to have second thoughts. The wind was blowing strongly now, and even the taller trees were leaning and tossing in the gale.

You can't give up now, he told himself. *Somebody is killing things out there. And you have to get proof, so that this time people will believe you.*

Gritting his teeth, he steered the hoverscooter in among the storm-bent trunks. The rain came down in sheets, even here in the forest. Lightning flashed overhead, and thunder cracked. The wind tried to tear his soaked clothing away from his body.

The scooter bucked and bumped. A sudden gust ripped up one of the trees, roots and all, and tossed it down on the path in front of him. Another tree fell on the path behind, blocking the way back.

This, thought Sean, *is even worse than the other night.*

In the hallway of the Bradbury School, Philippa Bidding and Arkady Davidov waited for Zach and Daffy to emerge from the director's office. Suddenly, Philippa gave a start. "It's Sean," she said. She felt a sensation like cold rain dashing against her, linked with a flash of his face, and she shivered. "He's in trouble. I think he's trapped somewhere. We have to help him."

Arkady gave a quick nod. "We can use Zach's scooter."

They ran for the school doors. As soon as they were outside, the wind hit them—what had been a strong late-afternoon breeze had blown up into a full-scale storm while they waited for Zach and Daphne. Already the wind felt stronger than the one that had blown away the new town two

nights ago. Through rifts in the blowing clouds, Philippa could see the two moons

Justine and Juliette, both full, with the smaller, closer Justine a circle against the disk of Juliette.

Arkady glanced at the sky. "Wouldn't it be better to send a rescue robot?"

"Who's going to believe that he needs rescuing?" asked Philippa. She put a mock pleading note in her voice. "Please, sir, could you send out a search team because we have a feeling our friend's in trouble?"

Arkady winced. "You're right; they'd laugh us out of the office. Let's go."

In Dr. Ives's office, Zach and Daphne told their story for a second time. The stern-faced Alphorionite listened without visible reaction, his eyes glowing faintly in the dim light. When they had finished, he clasped his hands on the desk top and looked at them for a moment without speaking. Finally he said, "These are serious charges you're making, Mr. Yamoto, Miss DeVries. Are you sure of what you saw?"

"Yes, sir," said Zach,

"Absolutely," Daphne added.

The green, glowing eyes rested first on Zach, and then on Daphne. "Interesting, then. I suppose we should send a probe to those coordinates."

"Thank you, sir," said Zach.

Dr. Ives gave a curt nod. "Now, about that talking theskie. The quote is exact?"

"As close as I can remember," said Daphne.

"And I have a good memory for lines."

Dr. Sves looked thoughtful. "Then the beast was talking—in a considerably scrambled fashion—about law and murder. You at least, Miss DeVries, should have been able to supply some of the missing elements: 'My offense is rank, it smells to heaven, for it hath the primal curse upon't, a brother's murder.'"

Daphne's eyes widened. "But that's from *Hamlet"*

"Exactly," said Dr. Ives. "Unusual reading for a theskie, I would say. As for the rest of its speech . . . we have parts of another quotation that also invokes the law—most aptly, since what you describe is clearly illegal—and requires someone to bear witness. The original is in Greek, but a common translation runs, 'Go and tell the Spartans, passerby, that here, obedient to their laws, we lie.'"

"What's that mean?" asked Zach.

"It's the epitaph of the Spartan dead at Thermopylae," said Dr. Ives. "Look it up—if, indeed, you have not already."

"Don't you believe us?" demanded Zach. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Daphne looking stricken and indignant.

"After the little affair of the 'broken' holovid teaching machines?" inquired Dr. Ives. "Your credibility isn't the highest. And you at least, Mr. Yamoto, have a somewhat antiquarian taste in reading matter—and can research a subject thoroughly when it pleases you to exert yourself. But

we will see." The director of the Bradbury School rose from behind his desk. "Let's check the readout on the scooter's inertial tracking device."

Zach, Daphne, and Dr. Ives made their way through the wind and driving rain to the front of the Information Resurce Center. When they reached the edge of the little lot where hover-scooters were usually parked, Zach halted and stared in dismay. The hoverscooter had vanished.

"But it was right here!" he exclaimed. "Someone must have taken it."

"Undoubtedly," said Dr. Ives. The green light of his eyes shone even more strongly out here in the storm-dark parking lot. The wind whipped up his fringe of white hair into an angry halo. "So there is no scooter, and no record of exactly where you say you have been. This is a little too much even for me to believe. I suggest both of you go home."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Bitter Wind and Rain

Sweating in spite of the soaking downpour, Sean leaned again on the broken tree limb he was using as a lever. With what looked like another wild night coming on, he'd decided to postpone his search for proof until tomorrow, and devote his energies to returning home in one piece.

Just a little more, he exhorted the fallen trunk in front of him. *Just a little ... there!* The heavy tree lifted clear of the soggy ground and rolled backward out of the path. Sean remounted his hoverscooter and switched on the power. *Now to get back home before it's too dark to find the way.*

The vehicle hummed into life, rising until it bounced on its pressor beam a few centimeters above the earth. Sean maneuvered carefully around the exposed roots of the tree he'd just moved, and then set the hoverscooter speeding

homeward toward the town.

* * *

With *five* extra bodies fitted into the Riedel-Mornette iiving space, Paul Riedel found the population pressure more than a little overwhelming. Not even the storm blowing' down on Ambora could keep him from leaving the crowded house and fighting his way through the tempest to city center and the Research dome.

Once inside, he dried his hands on a spare lab coat and went to his terminal. Now that he was here, he decided, he might as well check the readouts on the storm. Something interesting might have turned- up.

Something had.

The ion level had risen higher than his most pessimistic projections. Moreover, the wind-speed was also rising, with gusts coming in ever-increasing frequency and velocity. *What is this weather going to do to the buildings in town?* he wondered. *No one's ever subjected silanna to stresses like these before.*

He transferred the new data to his simulation program and then waited. The resulting projection didn't reassure him at all; it showed the older structures remaining stable, but the error factor was far too high. Back on Jaspar, he reflected, Engineering wouldn't have passed a structure that likely to collapse, not when the atmosphere outside would kill anyone who tried to breathe it.

But domeworlders hadn't built Ambora. Paul frowned at the monitor display a little longer, and then stood up. It was time to see if he could borrow a square meter of expanded silanna from

the researchers over in Building Materials.

"I don't care if the error factor *is* low enough for them," he muttered. "I'm going to put some silanna into the Atmospherics Lab's environment chamber and test it myself."

Out in the woods to the northeast of town, the scooter bounced and slewed from side to side as Arkady fought the wind. Philippa had nearly lost her seat on the cargo compartment more than once already; now she rode with her arms clasped around Arkady's waist. *It's almost night,* she thought. *If we don't find Sean soon, we 'II have to turn back.*

"Which way now?" Arkady shouted over the sound of the wind and the rain.

The Thetan's awareness of the group link had proved too weak for tracking purposes, forcing Philippa to act as navigator. Now she closed her eyes and tried to shut out the racket of the storm long enough to consult her inner compass. "That way," she said, pointing.

"We're zigzagging all over the place," complained Arkady, as he steered the scooter onto the new course. "Maybe we ought to go back and get professional help after all."

"Just hurry before he changes direction again," said Philippa, suppressing her own inner misgivings. "If he needs us, and we can help him, how can we possibly turn back?"

Arkady made a wordless noise of agreement and fed the scooter more power. Philippa clasped him tighter as they pushed onward through the storm. Then, without warning, the ground fell away beneath them. The scooter's low-step setting failed to compensate for the drop, and they crashed downward into darkness.

There was a moment of silence. When Philippa's head cleared, she found herself lying facedown in what felt like dead and sodden leaves. *Even the storm seems quieter down here,* she thought. *Wherever here is.*

She groped about, taking inventory. *I'm alive, and I can still move everything—the scooter's pressor beam must have taken part of the shock before I was thrown clear.*

She looked upward, and saw a strip of paler darkness directly overhead. "We must have fallen into some sort of gully or ravine," she said aloud. Her voice echoed strangely in the narrow, steep-sided place.

Another voice answered out of the dark. "Philippa?"

"Arkady! Where are you?"

"Over here."

His voice sounded strained. She felt her way across the mud and wet leaves until she found Arkady lying in a heap on the sodden ground. One leg was twisted underneath him.

"Can you stand up?" she asked.

"I haven't tried yet," he said, still in that tight, tense voice. "1 think I've sprained my leg. How's the scooter?"

"Let me check." She retraced her steps, or tried to, and located the vehicle by tripping over it. "Ouch," she said absently, running her hands over the control panel. "Now where's the starter switch ... rot and corrosion!"

"What's wrong?"

She made her way back to where Arkady was lying. "The scooter's dead. We have to get out of this ditch."

"The *Settlers' Handbook* says to stay by your vehicle," Arkady protested. "Search robots home on metal."

"We can wait on the bank, then," said Philippa. "But not down here. If it's raining this hard up in the hills, we could get caught in a flash flood any moment."

"All right," said Arkady. "Let's give it a try."

"Lean on my shoulder," she said. "Ready? One ... two ... three!"

He must be really hurt, she thought a second later. They were both standing, but she had to support more of Arkady's weight than she'd expected. *He'd never take this much help from someone otherwise.*

"I don't think," she said aloud, "that climbing out is such a good idea right now. Let's go on downhill a little first and see if the slope gets any easier."

Ambora was full of wind and driven sand. Rain came down in sheets, dimming the light

from the glowglobes along the thoroughfares. More new buildings were disengaging, their silanna blowing away on the wind, turning and spinning as it dissolved. Even the older buildings were beginning to show signs of wear.

Sean Matthews parked the hoverscooter by his front door and dashed inside.

"Mom! Dad! I need to talk to you about something important!"

The loco floated out of the kitchen nook. "Your parents are at a meeting in the Administration dome," the robot said. "They called to leave word that the regular session has been extended in order to develop a response to worsening weather conditions."

"Great, just great," muttered Sean, heading for the terminal in his room. The loco followed him.

"You are soaking wet, Sean. Shall I bring you dry clothes?"

"Go ahead," Sean said. He moved a quufer off the terminal's keyboard, and logged into the town net. *Try Zach and Daphne first,* he thought. *See if they had any luck.*

Both his friends were at home. "1 had to turn back," he told them. "It got too thick outside. How did things go with you?"

"Horrible," Zach replied. "We couldn't find anybody to report to but Laser Eyes—and he didn't believe a word we said."

"Did you at least give him the coordinates from the hoverscooter?"

On the terminal screen, Zach's image shook its head in puzzlement. "We couldn't. The scooter wasn't there when we went to look."

"That's corrosive," said Sean. "Some toroid must have borrowed it to get home on. Who else besides Dr. Ives knows about what we saw?"

"Only Philippa and Arkady," said Zach. "We found them in the IRC before we talked to Dr. Ives."

"That's another thing," Daphne cut in. "Arkady hasn't come home yet."

"Does anybody know where he's gone?" asked Sean. He punched in Philippa's call-code as he spoke.

"Nobody," said Daphne; and the terminal announced, "No answer from Bidding, P."

"Blast it!" said Sean. "I'll bet they're the ones who took the scooter."

"But why would they do that?" asked Daphne.

"Because they thought another one of us was in trouble," said Sean. "Like me. Listen, guys ... I'll get back to you later, okay?"

He cut the connections to the Yamoto and Davidov households, and punched in the transport yard's call code. The yard's in/out log didn't show either scooter as having been

turned back in.

They're still out there, all right, thought Sean, clearing the screen. *And it's my fault.*

He entered yet another call-code and got the Search and Rescue center. The harried-looking dispatcher at the other end was unsympathetic.

"In case you haven't noticed," the man said, "we're having a natural disaster here. The Gandria shuttle's been grounded by high wind

and heavy rain, there's a soil-sampling expedition stranded in the Catalans, and we've already got a missing-persons list a page and a half long."

"Couldn't you at least detail a search robot?" asked Sean. "I know they're out there somewhere."

"Most of our robots are busy already," said the dispatcher. "And the ones that aren't, are broken. Give me your friends' names and last known location, and we'll get to them as soon as we can."

Sean held on to his temper with an effort. "Davidov comma Arkady, and Bidding comma Philippa."

The dispatcher frowned. "Is it 'Philippa' with one *I* or with two?"

That was too much. "Figure it out for yourself!" Sean snapped, and cut the connection.

The loco stopped him before he reached the front door. "I have your dry clothes, Sean."

"Forget it. I'm just going to get wet again."

"Your parents will be most displeased...." the loco was saying as the door slid shut behind him.

He mounted the hoverscooter and drove off into the night.

It seemed to Philippa that she and Arkady had been stumbling along the bottom of the ravine forever. Arkady leaned on her shoulder, his weight pulling her down; she could feel him shivering in the cold rain that soaked them both. From time to time, now, they had to wade. The

downpour had turned the bottom of the gully into a small stream, its rushing waters growing deeper and stronger.

At last they broke out of the steep-walled ravine onto open ground and air that smelled of the ocean. Philippa felt a surge of hope—a feeling that lasted only until the next flash of lightning.

Ahead of them, across black sand, lay the Kartai Sea, its surface whipped into white foam by the storm. To right and left, high black cliffs rose against the night.

"I think we're in trouble," said Arkady.

"At least we know where we are," said Philippa, with counterfeit briskness. "We never crossed the Gandria road, so this must be north of town. All we have to do is turn left and follow the beach. The path up the cliffs at Sanjo Bay is gentle enough."

"Do you think we'll make it before the tide comes in?"

"We have to," she said. "Come on."

They started down the beach. Ahead lay darkness, illuminated only by bolts of lightning that ripped across the sky like glittering, forking tongues of fire. With every flash, Philippa's hopes sank lower.

The tide was coming in. The width of the beach was slowly diminishing. Before long, it had shrunk to half of what it had been when she and Arkady emerged from the ravine.

We're not going fast enough, Philippa thought. "Let's pick up the pace a bit," she said aloud, hating the mock-cheerful tone she forced into her voice. "Think you can manage it?"

"Sure," said Arkady. But his efforts brought only a small increase in speed—and then his leg buckled under him. Most of his weight had been on her shoulder, and when he collapsed she fell with him onto the wet, gritty sand.

Philippa could hear Arkady trying to bite back sobs of pain. When he spoke, it sounded as if the words came from between clenched teeth. "I can't walk any farther, Pippa. You'll have to go on without me."

She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him as hard as she dared. "Arkady Davidov! If you don't get up and start walking by the time I count to five, I swear I'm going to fold my hands and sit here until we *both* drown! Do you hear me? One..."

To her relief, she heard a faint answering laugh. "All right, all right. I'll get up—but I'm afraid you'll have to help."

Her own voice shook with reaction. "No problem. What else are friends for?"

They continued walking south.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Time and Tide

For the third time that day, Sean steered his borrowed hoverscooter into the forests north of Ambora. Already, this trip was shaping up as more trouble than the other two put together. The rain beat down, the wind keened about his ears like a living thing, and in spite of his good intentions he had no idea where his friends had gone.

So far, he hadn't seen any trace of Philippa and Arkady, or of the missing hoverscooter.

He'd come this far on a hunch, backed only by the knowledge that if his friends had indeed left town in search of him, they would have traveled northeast. Once or twice in the past few weeks, he'd been able to sense the near presence of members of the group; but either Philippa and Arkady were too far away, or his own ability—wherever it came from—was too weak.

Maybe I need to relax and concentrate, he thought. Somewhere out in the dark forest, he heard a rending crash as another tree went down. *And maybe I need to have a nice long chat with Dr. Tourni about my unrealistic expectations, too.*

Still he couldn't bring himself to go back without trying his intuition one more time. He stopped the scooter, got off, and closed his eyes.

Nothing happened. *What did you expect, Matthews? Some kind of revelation?*

Disgusted at himself for wanting the impossible, Sean opened his eyes again—and saw, close by, a squad of amber-eyed, unhuman troopers in dark fatigues. They carried the same uncanny weapons he had seen before in the holovid. They were looking for something, too—and Sean was suddenly afraid that it might be him.

He mounted the scooter and sped away into the darkness.

It's no me, Philippa admitted to herself at last. *The tide's beaten us.*

The rising water had come in faster and faster as she and Arkady hobbled along the ever-narrowing strand. At last they'd taken refuge on top of a pile of boulders, part of the towering palisade that had crumbled under the ocean's relentless attack.

The rain had slackened some, but the wind was still rising. Driven by the gale, the clouds had begun to break up and move away from the

moons. Once again, Justine and Juliette bathed the sea with a pale mauve light.

Philippa had no eyes for the wild beauty of the moonlit seascape. To north and south of the refuge she shared with Arkady, fierce waves already beat at the foot of the cliffs. But even if through some miracle a way had opened up, they couldn't have escaped; the effort of scrambling up the wet, shifting rockpile had taken the last of Arkady's strength. Now they could only crouch in the lee of one of the huge boulders, and wait.

"It won't be long now," said Arkady. The Thetan was shaking all over from pain and weakness; Philippa held him as tightly as she could, hoping to share some of her own warmth.

He kept on talking, as if confessing something to himself. "I wish I'd never left my homeworld ... and Anna."

"Anna?" she asked. It was a name she'd never heard him mention before.

"My girlfriend," he said. "Back on Theta. I was kind of glad to leave, because she wanted things to get more serious than I did, but now I'd give anything to be with her

again."

Another wave broke against the pile of rocks. This one came higher than the ones before it, spraying Philippa and Arkady with salt water before it receded. More waves, crashing ever higher, splashed foam among the rocks and then retreated, only to reach higher still with the next assault.

"I wish I were back on Alphorion myself," said

Philippa. "But I don't have any right to complain. Not when this is all my fault."

"Your fault?" Arkady's voice altered, becoming stronger and less dreamy. "That's silly, Pippa."

She shook her head. "Coming out here was my idea, remember?"

He actually gave a weak chuckle. "I'm here of my own free and stupid will Nobody twisted my arm."

"Maybe," she said. "But I wish I'd listened when you said we ought to stay in town. I've never brought anyone good luck, Arkady; I'm just sorry you had to get mixed up with me."

Arkady frowned.

"What sort of nonsense is that?"

"No nonsense," she said. "Truth. I'm the only reason my parents are here, and not on Alphorion."

Another wave hit the rocks a meter or so beneath her feet. She held tighter to Arkady and kept on talking. It felt good to tell somebody, after so many months of silence, and in a few more minutes nothing would matter anyway.

"I don't know what politics are like on Theta," she said, "but back on Alphorion they can get, well, sort of complicated. Mostly because not everybody thinks that the Planetary League is such a good idea."

"Why not?" asked Arkady.

"Because the colonies are being exploited," said Philippa. Anything was better than watching the rising water, and even now the old arguments came easily to mind. "Earth is burnt out and polluted—it can't even feed its own people any more-—but Earth still runs the League and the League runs the colonies. Alphorion's been a self-sufficient world for generations—and we're *still* paying taxes to support people whose ancestors didn't have the guts to go into space!" "You say that like you believe it." "Maybe I do," she said. "I don't know anymore. But my parents were prominent on Alphorion, and they never had much time for me. I got involved with some anti-League revolutionaries. Not the violent kind, even though there are some. My group mostly sat around and talked about how terrible things were. One of them would say 'It's bad,' and another would say

'No, it's worse.' On and on like that. Then, at one of the meetings, there was a guy ... one of the leaders ... he needed somebody to carry messages, he said, and I volunteered. Who'd ever suspect that the proper Miss Philippa Bidding of the First Settlement Biddings would be carrying subversive material in her date book?"

She swallowed hard and continued. "Then, one day, the police caught up with me. My parents were appalled—they'd never suspected what I was doing. It hadn't seemed so wrong to me, just exciting, like a game. But the Planetary League takes revolutionaries seriously. I was in disgrace ... my whole family was disgraced,

which is how my parents wound up 'transferred' to Gauguin."

A heavy wave struck just beneath Philippa's feet, drenching her and Arkady with salt water. She glanced up at the top of the cliff. It seemed a million kilometers away.

She sighed. "At least now I won't be messing up people's lives anymore."

Sean stood on the edge of the cliffs overlooking the Kartai. He'd sped away from the phantom troopers almost at random—or so he'd thought at the time, until his momentary panic faded. A new awareness had replaced it, a sense that his unthinking flight had somehow pointed him in the right direction. He'd followed that awareness as far as it would lead him, but now it seemed as if he'd been msitaken. Nothing lay ahead of him except the wind-tossed ocean.

From his vantage point, he looked north and south along the shore, and saw nothing but waves breaking at the foot of the palisades. Still, he couldn't rid himself of the conviction that his friends were somewhere close by. Feeling rather foolish, he bent and looked down over the edge.

Nothing. Just piles of tumbled rock, and the waves rushing in to hit and rise upward in tall plumes of spray.

He started to straighten, and then bent again to look closer. Had his peripheral vision caught a faint greenish glimmer, showing up against the black rocks below?

It had: a light source too faint to see straight on, but present all the same. Reason told him that it must be phosphorescent seaweed, or the moons reflecting from wet rock—but Sean knew with a certainty stronger than reason that the light came from Philippa Bidding's eyes.

The rising water had almost covered the pile of stone below. Sean looked southward toward Ambora. He didn't need the scooter's navpack to tell him he didn't have time to get to town and bring back help. Philippa and Arkady had only a few minutes left.

It's all up to me, Sean thought. He remounted the hoverscooter, and backed it up about fifty meters from the edge of the cliff. Stopping the vehicle, he knelt beside the power compartment and opened the access plate. "Let's see," he muttered, groping about in the interior of the cramped compartment. "The regulator has to be around here somewhere."

He closed his eyes and tried to picture in his mind the layout of a scooter's power compartment as he'd seen it demonstrated a few days ago in the motor transport yard. Using that as a guide, he located the device that held the scooter in low-step mode, so that it rode on a pressor column only centimeters high. He removed the regulator, and then felt about again for the shorting bars kept with the scooter for full-power tests.

There they were, clipped to the inside of the access plate. He inserted the bars in the regulator's place, and shut the plate. Then he stood up

again, and remounted the hoverscooter. If he'd put in the shorting bars correctly, the motor should work even with the regulator removed.

He switched on the scooter. The power came up high and hard—so far so good. Now to find out whether his idea was going to work.

He turned the vehicle back toward the cliff. / *have to get way out,* he thought, *and make certain I have a clear drop under me.* He put the scooter into high forward and headed toward the precipice, gaining speed as he drew nearer. The edge raced up to him—and then he was over and in free fall.

Sean cut forward thrust, and switched all the scooter's power into vertical boost. A glowing pressor beam shone out from beneath the scooter. But even at max power, the column didn't extend far enough to reach the surface. Air whistled past his ears as he fought to keep the scooter upright.

Keep it under you ... get ready for the bounce. ...

The scooter fell for about five meters, and then Sean felt a spongy shock as the pressor's column touched bottom. The heavy vehicle balanced, shifted. ... *She's starting to flip!* he thought, and threw his weight to the other side. The scooter came back level, and rested precariously atop its glowing pillar.

Sean concentrated on reducing the height of the pressor column. Gradually, centimeter by centimeter, he brought the scooter down and

then rode it in, touching ground at last on a pile of slick, broken rock.

Her story finished, Philippa looked out across the raging waters of the Kartai. *Only a few minutes now,* she thought.

Suddenly, she saw a flash of light high above her, a fluorescent glow near the top of the towering cliff. As she watched, the glow became a cylinder of yellow light falling end-on toward them. The glowing cylinder touched the water, and then began to collapse in on itself, a little at a time.

"Look, Arkady!" she exclaimed. "Someone's come for us!" The vehicle riding the column grounded on the rocks not far away. *Only a hoverscooter,* thought Philippa. / *thought from the size of its column that they must have brought a transport at least.* But right now, even a scooter came close to looking like the miracle she hadn't dared to hope

for. She waved an arm. "Over here!"

"Hey, guys," called Sean Matthews's voice out of the darkness, "I've been looking all over for you two. Are you all right?"

Philippa felt a wild surge of hope. "I'm okay," she called. "But Arkady's got a bad leg."

"And this water isn't getting any lower," said Sean, steering the hoverscooter over toward the rocks. "Let's help him aboard and get out of here."

He sounded casual, but Philippa wasn't

deceived; she knew from experience how fear and worry could hide behind an untroubled facade. With Sean's assistance, she was able to help Arkady onto the scooter. Then she got on herself, sitting with the Thetan on top of the cargo compartment—a comfortable seat for one, but a crowded perch for two.

"Hang on," said Sean. "Here we go."

The scooter started to rise. The motor whined and labored under the heavy load. Meter after meter of black, spray-slicked cliff slid past them as the pressor column extended upward.

Then the cliff stopped moving. The scooter's motor howled on a high piercing note, but no amount of power could coax it to produce another decimeter of height. Philippa looked upward. The top of the cliff seemed close, but she knew it was too far for any of them to reach.

Slowly, Sean brought the hoverscooter back down. The disappointment after renewed hope was almost too much for Philippa to bear. "It was a nice try," she said in a flat tone. "But you should have stayed home. Now we can all drown together."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Is This the End?

Paul Riedel held a small piece of expanded-silanna building material in his hands. The sample was dry and brittle; every time he moved, grains of dust fell from it. He gave the slab a light twist. It crumbled in his grip.

The sample he'd been playing with had been grown months ago when the level of ionization in the atmosphere had been normal. The majority of Ambora's domes and houses had gone up during that same period. Now, under the influence of the high ion concentration, the buildings were returning to the sand from which they had been made.

He frowned. The city collapsing in wind and rain ... where had he heard that before? *It was before the first storm night,* he thought. *Back before anyone knew what was going to happen.* Then he remembered: his stepbrother Will

Mornette, at the beach party, had told the others about something strange he'd seen in the settlement hoiotheater.

Paul punched up his stepbrother's call code into the nearest terminal. Will's image came up on the screen.

His stepbrother looked surprised. "I was just about to call you myself. Have you seen Sean lately?"

"No," said Paul. "Listen, Will—"

"How about Arkady and Philippa? I just checked with the Davidovs, and they're not over there."

"I haven't seen them either," said Paul impatiently. "Will, do you remember what you saw in the hoiotheater?"

"What I saw in the ... Paul, are your ears hooked up right? Three of my friends are missing!"

"If I see them, I'll tell them you're looking for them," Paul said. "Right now, I want you to tell me what you saw in the hoiotheater that time."

His stepbrother gave him a dark look, but answered anyway. "I saw the town collapsing, and the ocean rising up into the sky, and lightning all over everything."

/ *thought I remembered something about lightning!* Paul thought triumphantly. Already, the pieces of an idea were beginning to fit into place. Aloud, he said as calmly as he could, "You're sure about that?"

Will nodded. "Positive. But why do you want to know?"

"I'll tell you later if it works," said Paul, and cut the connection. He pulled in the statistics for the colony and then did some quick figuring. Yes! There was a chance, a slight one, that the trick might work.

He half-ran down the hall to Building Materials Research—usually a quiet place, crowded now with scientists looking for a solution to the crumbling-silanna problem.

Paul rushed up to Dr. Rilvh, head of the Building Materials lab. "Dr. Rilvh, I think I—"

"Get that boy out of here," Rilvh said without looking up. "Who has the results on the fixative tests?"

"We're only binding the top layers," an assistant reported. "Not enough to hold the entire structure."

Rilvh glanced hastily at the assistant's proffered clipboard, then handed it back. "Keep going. I think the answer's along that line."

"Dr. Rilvh!" said Paul. "Dr. Rilvh, I think I know how to solve the building problem!"

Rilvh turned and stared coldly down at Paul. "Well?" he rapped out. "What is it?"

Paul swallowed, and then started explaining as fast as he could. "The problem is caused by ionization, and when my brother saw something in a holovid up at..."

The head of Building Materials was already turning away. "Ionization hasn't done this any-

where else in the civilized universe," he said over his shoulder. "This is just sloppy work by construction. The first high wind . . ."

Paul kept trying. "You just have to counteract the ionization by —"

Dr. Rilvh didn't even turn around this time. "I said get out of here. We're busy."

"But, Dr. Rilvh, if you'd just—"

"Somebody get that kid out of here!" snapped Rilvh.

One of the huskier lab assistants took Paul by the shoulder. "I think you'd better leave now."

"But—"

"Now," said the lab assistant. He shoved Paul out into the corridor. The laboratory door clicked shut.

Paul stood outside the closed door for a moment, then left. He wandered outside the Research Center. The rain had stopped, but the wind was blowing even harder than when he had left home. He stroked one hand down the side of the dome and came up with a handful of sand. / *have to get home and warn everyone,* he thought. *Our house is going to blow away like the rest.*

He began to run through the night. The wind howled around him, stinging his face with flying grit. Overhead, another piece of silanna tumbled past. All around him, the domes of the city were starting to tear apart like tissue on the wind. He wished he'd never left Jaspar, never come to this planet where overnight open skies could turn into uncontrolled destruction.

A shape loomed out of the darkness ahead. It was Zach Yamoto. "Have you seen Arkady?" yelled the older boy.

"No," Paul yelled back above the keening of the wind. "I'm going home before my house blows down."

"It's going to get that bad?"

Paul waved an arm at the storm. "Take a look around! It's all falling apart already!" He glared at the older boy. "I could stop it, but no one will listen to me."

Zach grabbed his flailing arm and held it. "You're not just talking?"

"I've got the data," said Paul, jerking his arm away. "If you don't believe me—"

"Never mind the data," said Zach. "You need to talk to my father. He'll listen. Come on!"

They dashed through the residential streets to Zaeh's house. Already a long crack ran up one side of the building. Inside, Zaeh's father was talking over the comm line to one of the communications repeater stations.

"I know that the shelter is blowing down around you. ... I don't care about that. ... Transmit in the blind if you have to. ... All frequencies, as long as you have power. ... Get the message through. ... As soon as the storm clears, I want a disaster team down here with enough transport to pull everyone off.... I know the colony can't requisition that. I'm League Patrol, and I can. ... Just do it!"

He broke the link. "I've got some prime idiots working for me," he muttered.

"Dad," Zach said.

"Yes? Why aren't you putting together supplies and clothing bundles like 1 told you to?"

"Paul says he knows how to save the colony."

Lucas Yamoto looked at his son for a moment, then turned to Paul. "Talk fast," he said. "We don't have much time."

At the foot of the palisade cliffs, waves were already starting to wash over the rock where the hoverscooter rested. Sean shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought maybe with the regulator off, the scooter's pressor column could push us up high enough."

"It's all right," said Arkady. "You did the best you could."

But it still wasn 't enough, Sean thought. Aloud, he said, "There is one more thing we can try. But I have to make a couple of adjustments first."

He got down from the scooter and crouched beside it. The cold sea water lapped at his ankles. Overhead, the wind still howled and raged. For a second time, he opened the access plate. "I learned more than one trick at the scooter repair yard," he said as he began feeling about in the scooter's insides.

"What are you doing down there?" Philippa asked.

"Taking off all the safeties and automatic shut-

downs," Sean said. "I'm going to see exactly what one of these babies can do."

The job finished, he closed the access plate and remounted the scooter. "Everybody hold on tight," he said as he resumed his place behind the controls, with Philippa and Arkady behind him. "We're taking the long way home."

Turning the scooter toward the sea, Sean switched into forward and edged out above the heaving waves. He piloted the vehicle past the breakers in high-step mode, keeping it well above the foam and jets of spray, before bringing it back into low-hover to conserve power for the journey ahead of them.

It was a rough ride. Up and down, barely five centimeters above the storm-racked ocean,

the hoverscooter sped across the Kartai Sea. Sean had to steer his course with care, going neither too far off shore nor too close in. Away from the shelter of the cliffs the sea was too rough for the scooter to navigate, with the storm wind cutting the tops off the waves and casting them out over the water in long patches of foam. Closer inshore, monstrous breakers smashed against the foot of the long cliffs that ringed the bay.

Arkady Davidov's Thetan accents came to him over the booming of the waves. "How are we doing?"

"Just fine," Sean yelled back. It was a lie in a good cause, but still a lie. He'd used the scooter all day, and expended power recklessly; nor did his latest rewiring job save energy. *What with us*

being overloaded and all, he thought, *the power level is going down a lot quicker than I'd like.*

Something in his voice must have given him away to Arkady—or perhaps Josef Davidov's son had inherited his father's rapport with mechanisms of every sort. "How about the power?" asked the Thetan. "Can we make it on what's left?"

So much for lying in a good cause, thought Sean. "We'll just have to find out by the experimental method."

He heard Philippa give a somewhat hysterical laugh. "Now, that is what I call comforting."

"Best I can do," he said, and kept the scooter heading southward into the night.

They rounded a headland, and suddenly the lights of Ambora came into view before them. The rain had stopped, but the storm wind was still blowing down across the city like a scourge. Before their eyes, a huge piece of silanna lifted up and floated off toward the mountains, its undulating surface illuminated from beneath by the city lights.

Sean watched its progress with a kind of frightened awe. *To see it from here,* he thought, *that sheet had to be at least half a building.*

Then the yellow-amber lights of the city dimmed and went out. In their place, a different sort of light appeared: a crackling blue corona discharge, huge electric sparks leaping from building to building and up to the sky, fountains

of electric fire illuminating the domes before blinking into darkness.

The lightning display increased in size. The light was so bright that the three friends could see the wavetops clearly illuminated by it, along with the top edge of the cliff, and the spit of land to the north of Sanjo Bay. Thunder rolled.

"I can see the path!" shouted Arkady. "We're almost home!"

Philippa gave another laugh. "Let's hope that home stays around long enough for us to get there."

Sean looked down at the power readouts, and his heart sank. "We won't have to worry about that," he said. "We can't even make it to the path."

He turned the hoverscooter toward the cliffs below the town, drove it forward, caught a wave and began to ride it in. Then he switched off the power.

Now the scooter was acting just like one of Zach Yamoto's surfboards—a clumsy, overloaded, off-balance surfboard. The wave they were riding, powered by the stormwinds, towered far higher than any of the ones he'd ridden in his short career as a surfer. And at the end of his ride waited not the warm sand of a beach, but the jagged rock of the palisade.

The cliff grew closer and closer. Sean shifted his weight to urge the scooter higher onto the crest of the wave. The lightning from the city glared in his face. Thundersounds roared in his ears—the booming of the waves against the vertical cliff, the reverberating roar from the city itself.

At the last possible moment, Sean powered up the scooter again and cranked in maximum lift. The scooter went over the top of the wave, over the plunging breaker, up and up. He almost made it to the top of the cliff—but the wave wasn't quite high enough and the scooter just didn't have quite enough reserve.

They missed the top, and fell down again toward the angry sea. Then, with a jarring crash, the scooter caught on a narrow ledge twenty meters below the edge of the cliff.

"Get off!" shouted Sean. "Hurry!"

Pulling together, he and Philippa got Arkady off the scooter and onto the rock. Freed of their weight, the scooter teetered and slid into the foam below.

Sean looked up toward the top of the cliff. The black shadow of an overhang blocked out half the night sky. No way to climb, even if Arkady's leg had been well. Down below, the tide was still rising, each wave hitting higher on the palisades than the one before.

All the excitement of the wild searide drained out of Sean, and he slumped down onto the black rock of the ledge. "I'm sorry," he said, for the second time that evening. "We almost made it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Break, Break, Break on Thy Cold Gray Stones, O Sea!"

As Chief of Communications for the Gauguin colony, Lucas Yamoto rated a permanently assigned private hovercar, allowing him to visit all his far-flung communications facilities and antennae. Only minutes after Paul had finished talking, that hovercar was pulling up in front of the main Communications Control station in a

swirl of dust. Sand from the crumbling buildings was everywhere: on the ground, in the air, coating solid objects with a layer of white powder that glittered like snow in the moonlight.

Followed by Zach and Paul, the colony's Communications Chief walked into the station's control room. "Any word on how Gandria is holding out?" he asked the man on watch.

The comm-technician shrugged. "Up to the point the relay station went down, they were doing fine, but no telling now."

"I hope they make it," said Commander Yamoto. "We'll send someone in the morning. Right now, I'm going to take control of the board. Go over to Power and get me everything you can. Class One override. Cut all services. Feed the juice through here."

"Yes sir, on my way." The technician left.

Once again, Zach's father looked at Paul. "The way I figure it," Lucas Yamoto said, "if you're right, we save the buildings; but if you're wrong, we lose everything. And you want me to believe you're right."

"Yes sir," said Paul. "The only thing that holds a silanna matrix together is the way its molecules share the extra electrons in their outer shells. Right now, there's a bigger ion storm going on than anyone has ever seen anywhere, and it's leeching away those electrons into the atmosphere. Our only chance is to use counter-ionic discharges—flood everything with negative energy and neutralize the effect of the ion storm."

"I believe you," said Commander Yamoto. "We've been running into that ionic interference ourselves in communications. Besides—if we don't do anything at all, we lose the city anyway."

A red light began blinking on the control board. "Good," said Zach's father. "I've got my power. Now I'm going to dump everything we have: high frequency, high voltage, low amperage. It'll fry everything electronic, but it shouldn't

hurt anybody, and we can use candles for a few days if we have to. Here goes."

Lucas Yamoto set the power shunts to feed line voltage through a series of resonating chambers, then out through the antenna field and the city's power grid. "That's that," he said. "Now we find out whether I spend the rest of my life as a hero of Gauguin and the savior of Ambora, or spend it making big rocks into little ones on one of the asteroid mines."

They went back to the hovercar. As they left the building, Paul's hair stood on end from the charge in the air, and his skin tingled. All around the three of them, rising arcs of electricity shot cracking discharges forty meters into the air. Sparks leapt from building to building, and up to the sky. The streetlilghts had gone out, but Paul had no trouble seeing—the entire town glowed with electrical fire.

"We're pulling the storage cells down to nothing with this trick," Commander Yamoto said. "We'll need some other source of power besides solar if we plan on doing this a lot."

Paul walked over to a piece of silanna lying on the ground, blown there from a disintegrating building. As he reached for it, prickling sparks flew from his fingertips.

He picked up the slab of silanna. It was solid. He bent it. It didn't move. He hit it against the side of the building. Neither the slab nor the building broke.

"We've done it," said Paul. "The discharge has stopped the leeching effect—the silanna is holding again."

The salt spray hit Sean in the eyes each time a wave hit the cliff face below him. The water was still rising. Sean felt certain that the ocean would come above this spot at high tide. It was only a matter of time.

He counted and timed the waves. They came in groups of three: low, low, high; low, low, high. *It'll be a third wave that gets us,* he thought.

He looked over at his two companions on the ledge. Arkady lay stretched out, his injured leg extended and his head in Philippa's lap. She was stroking the Thetan's hair, and her expression was calm and faintly wistful. He realized that she never looked at him that way or ever let anyone see past her perfect exterior. Another wave broke, sending cold water over them. Arkady spoke. His voice sounded weak, but clear. "Pippa."

"Yes?"

"Remember how you knew where Sean was?"

Philippa nodded. "That's how we got into this mess."

"You were doing fine until we hit that gulch," said Arkady. He pushed himself up on one elbow. "Now, Sean—how did you find us?"

"I just went looking," said Sean. "And you were where I thought you'd be."

"I thought so," said Arkady, his voice getting stronger as he talked. "And if we three knew how

to find each other, then maybe the rest of the group can do it, too."

"So why aren't they here already?" asked Sean.

"They probably have problems of their own," said Arkady. "And we don't know how this ... connection... really works. But I say it can't hurt to think real hard about them and about where we are."

A wave broke against the cliff face with thunderous force, coming higher than any of the ones before it. The spray drenched the three teenagers.

"I'm thinking," said Sean hastily.

Philippa nodded. "Me, too."

"Socks ... shirts ... stuffed cuddly ..."

Clea Tourni had already packed her own bundle of clothing and precious possessions. Now she was making similar bundles for Sara and Andrena, working mostly by touch and the blue light that played over the domes outside.

When half the Medical Dome had peeled away and flown off on the wind, leaving whole wards exposed to flying sand, her parents had rushed off to help move the sick and injured. "You're in charge, Clea," Dr. Maria Tourni had said as the two adults headed out the door. "And pack some changes of clothing, just in case."

Now Clea's two younger sisters sat huddled together on the edge of her bed, wide-eyed with apprehension. For once, Sara and Andrena had

abandoned their usual squabbling. / *should have known it would take a natural disaster to make them shut up,* thought Clea, finishing. Sara's bundle and starting on Andrena's.

A knock sounded on the front door. *Knocking?* Clea wondered. *Right, the power's down.*

"Stay here," she said to her sisters, and ran to the door. She pushed the mechanical opening linkage, and the door ground open. Daphne DeVries stood outside. Her loose magenta mane waved about wildly in the electrically charged air.

Surprised, Clea said the first thing that came in mind. "Shouldn't you be home packing?"

The Felicidadena laughed. "Packing? I'm not even *unpacked* yet! I came to find out if you'd seen Arkady."

"No," said Clea. She felt a sudden prick of apprehension. "Why?"

"He's still missing. Sean and Philippa, too. They're having fits over at the Davidovs'."

"They can't be missing," said Clea. "I'd know if-"

She stopped, as a sudden wave of fear and cold despair made the words choke in her throat. The emotions weren't hers; she knew that at once. They came from outside, far stronger than her sisters' fright or Daphne's tense excitement, and a flood of images came with them: slick black rock, white windswept spray off the incoming waves, and the sheer face of the palisade.

She moaned. "Oh, no!"

"What's wrong?" asked Daphne.

"My friends," she said. "They're not missing, they're down near "the cliffs. And they're in dreadful trouble."

Zach Yamoto stood beside his father outside the house, watching the dazzling electrical display. "Talk about spectacular," Zach said. "I've never seen anything like it."

"I hope we don't have to see it again," said his father. "Every piece of electronic gear in

town that wasn't fully shielded is going to be ruined.".

Suddenly, Zach stiffened. "Dad, something's wrong."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. I can't explain. But something is. Can I use the hovercar?"

"If you really need it—but be careful. If you let it touch ground, it might fry, too."

Zach nodded. "I'll be careful."

He leaped into the hovercar and slammed the door behind him. A second later, the vehicle sped off in the direction of the Riedel-Mornette household.

"And the wicked queen said, 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall'..."

Daphne DeVries was telling stories to Andrena and Sara while Clea kept on packing. Clea barely listened to the Felicidadena's tale; it took all her concentration just to control her feeling of creeping doom.

Sean and the others are out there, she thought. *And they need me. But I can't leave here, I'm responsible. . . .*

A light flashed across the front of the house, steadier than the arcs of electricity still leaping between the buildings. A moment later, Zach Yamoto and Will Mornette were pounding on the front door and shouting her name.

"There's trouble," said Zach, as soon as she opened the door. "Over by the cliffs—Sean and Philippa and Arkady. We have to help them."

"I know," she said. The wind that still howled among the buildings almost drowned her reply. She looked out beyond Zach and Arkady at the wild, lightning-streaked backdrop of the city. On a night like this, a rescue wouldn't be easy. "But how are we going to do it?"

Zach pointed to the Yamoto family hovercar. ""In that. You coming?"

"Yes," she said, starting for the hovercar. Then she stopped. "I can't."

"What's the problem?" asked Will.

"My sisters," she said. "I'm supposed to be watching Sara and Andrena. I can't leave them alone!"

Daphne DeVries stuck her head around the corner of the bedroom door. "You go help. I'll stay with your sisters."

Impulsively, Clea dashed back and gave the Felicidadena a quick hug. "Thanks, Daffy. You're a lifesaver!"

Daphne pushed her toward the front entrance.

"All in a day's work. Now get on with the show!" As Clea ran for the door, she could

hear Daphne's voice again in the bedroom: "And the mirror said, 'O Queen, thou art fair'..."

Clea jumped into the waiting hovercar, and Will slammed the door shut behind her. Zach fed the craft full power, and they sped off. Within five minutes they had reached the cliffs overlooking the Kartai.

Zach stopped the hovercar and they all got out. The gale still blew across the headland, but the clouds had vanished, driven away by the high winds. In the bright moonlight, Clea could see the entire edge of the cliff. A wave broke below, and the glistening spray shot up above the lip of the precipice. In spite of herself, Clea cried out. Zach turned to her. "What's wrong?" "It's the others," she said. "They're trapped down there. And the tide is still coming in."

In a couple of minutes, thought Sean, *it's all going to be over.* Already, spray from the breaking waves was shooting far above the heads of the three on the ledge. So far, the ledge itself had protected them, but that couldn't last much longer. Soon the curling waves would smash down on their refuge, and that would be it.

Sean stood. Being careful not to step on Arkady's injured leg—the Thetan still lay with his head in Philippa's lap—he felt one more time along the cliff above him as high as he could reach. Even if Arkady couldn't climb out, maybe

he could and get help. But no cracks or fingerholds had magically appeared. Still no way up.

A wave struck beneath him, and the spray, heavier than before, smashed into his back like a fist. The weight of the water threw him against the cliff face with bruising force.

It's no use, he thought. He sank back down onto the rock and sat looking up, watching the blowing spray glisten in the moonlight and in the reflected glare from the lightning discharges above Ambora. Then, abruptly, he sat up straighter, and stared hard into the darkness.

A new shape had appeared against the night sky. Seconds later, a rope slapped into the cliff beside him. Another fell onto the other end of the ledge. Then two figures came swinging down, rappelling down the face of the cliff. They reached the ledge, and stopped.

"Hi, Sean," said Clea. "Going out with Phiiippa again?"

"Who, me?" His voice was shaky with relief. "I'm just the chaperone."

"That's what they all say," put in Zach Yamoto, laughing, and then called upward through cupped hands, "Got them! Throw down some more rope, and get set to back off!"

"Here, Sean," said Clea, her voice efficient and brisk. "Put your arms up. I'm going to tie this rope around you." She made the rope fast around him under his arms, and then

called out, "One to lift!"

Sean felt himself being pulled up. As he reached the top of the cliff and scrambled over,

he saw that the lifting power had come from the Yamoto's hovercar with Will Mornette at the controls. A few seconds later, Philippa came up over the edge, then Zach and Arkady, and finally Clea.

Sean disentangled himself from the rope and walked back over to the edge of the cliff. He looked down at the spot he and his two friends had occupied. As he watched, a wave broke directly on the ledge with the weight of tons of water.

"That was close," said Zach Yamoto.

Sean turned away from the cliff with a shudder. "You don't know the half of it. Let's get out of here."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

What Do You Do for an Encore?

Two weeks later, the colony on Gauguin was still recovering from the beating it had taken on the night of the second storm. Most of the older buildings in Ambora still stood, but a patchwork of repairs marred the graceful silanna domes. In the new section of town, construction went on night and day. The colony had all the destroyed housing to rebuild, plus more homes that had to go up before the arrival of another settler-ship—already out of touch in hyper-space by the time Gauguin's trouble started, and now scheduled to arrive within a few weeks.

Thanks to luck—or rather, to good design—the massive colony's vital systems had been shielded from the massive discharge of electrical energy that had saved the colony. But a host of minor systems and nonessentials had failed, and now had to be brought back on line one at a time. A

half-month after the storm winds had died, wall chronometers in the Admin building were still flashing unheeded "set me" messages.

The chrono outside the Board Chamber read 00:00 when Sean, Philippa, and Arkady went in to argue their case with the colony administrators. An hour later by the timepiece on Sean's wrist, the wall-chrono was still saying 00:00 when the three of them came out.

Zach Yamoto was waiting for them. "How did it go?" he asked.

Sean winced. "It was gruesome. Want to hear the details?"

"I'm always up for a good sob story," Zach replied. "The rest of the gang's down at the Greendomes Cafe. Care to join us?"

"Sure," said Arkady. The Thetan had made a fast recovery from his injury and was already getting about on a cane. The Board hearing on the two lost hoverscooters had been deferred until he could attend the meeting in person—an honor all three students involved would sooner have avoided.

"As long as the snacks are on you," added Philippa. "We aren't going to have any credits until sometime next century."

"No problem," said Zach. In short order, all the six were sitting together under the green-and-white-striped awning of the cafe, sampling some of Grumps's new produce and washing it down with Gauguin Punch. Except for Arkady's limp, the scrapes and bruises left by their adventures

during the great storm had all faded without ill effect. When it came to some of the other, less visible consequences—such as the undiminished strength of the peculiar mental current that seemed to link the group—Sean wasn't as sure.

"So what did the Board say?" Will Mornette asked, "immature, irresponsible, destructive, and stupid,"' Sean quoted. "And that's just for starters."

Arkady nodded confirmation. "After that, they started to get nasty."

"What it all comes down to," said Philippa, "is that the three of us are assigned to the hover-scooter repair yard for basically forever."

"Only until we've paid for the loss of the two that we wrecked," said Sean.

"Like I said—forever." Philippa sounded as if the idea didn't bother her very much, even though greasy coveralls and scraped knuckles would make an odd addition to her usual well-groomed image. In fact, she looked almost pleased at the prospect of doing hands-on repair work.

/ never realized she liked that sort of thing, thought Sean. *But then, she never really talks about herself at all.* Once again, he thought of the message on his father's terminal—ALL INFORMATION ON THIS SUBJECT RESTRICTED—and wondered just what secret Philippa's reticence might hide.

Next to him, Clea Tourni speared a chunk of melon with her fork and nibbled at it thoughtfully. "I don't suppose," she said after a moment, "that you three got a chance to explain how we all found each other."

"You've got to be kidding," said Sean, with a groan.

Philipa nodded. "The Board made it clear from the start that we were there to listen, not talk."

"And besides," finished Arkady, "what do we have for proof?"

For a moment or two, there was silence. Finally, Will said, "We know where everyone in the group is, more or less."

Arkady shook his head. "Anecdotal evidence. Just try getting a scientist to buy a story like that."

"How about the things we saw?" asked Zach. "The holovids and that weird stuff in the first storm?"

"Still no proof," said Arkady. "All they've got is our word for it."

"Don't forget how Paul saved the whole city," persisted Clea. "That idea came straight out of what Will saw in the holotheater, right after we all got jugged."

"Paul tried to tell people that," said Will. "He said something about always acknowledging your sources, even if you happen to think they're crazy."

"Maybe he's not a complete toroid after all," said Sean. "But I don't suppose anybody believed him."

"Nobody even listened," said Will. "The scientists are still embarrassed to admit they kicked him out of the lab in the first place."

"Typical," said Zach. "Nobody truly believed Daffy and me about the slaughtered pronghorns, either. Since there was no proof, they've decided to 'let it go' for now.

"That mess was real, all right," said Sean. "I was there, and I saw it." He frowned at his half-empty carton of Gauguin Punch, remembering the pronghorn's dangling, eviscerated body. "If only the storm hadn't washed away all our evidence. Not being able to even find the site again doesn't help our case either. Not with one of our inertial trackers washed out to sea, and the other already broken up for spare parts."

"But the hunters are still out there," said Clea. "Whoever they are." She shivered. "I can't imagine how anyone could do such a thing."

"No?" said Philippa. The Alphorionite smiled slightly, without humor. "I can think of six or seven people right here in Ambora who could do things like that ... and enjoy it, too."

"That's a nasty thought," said Clea, looking shocked.

"I can give you one that's even nastier," said Arkady. "If the animal-killer isn't a colonist ... then we've got people on this planet that nobody knows about. And not nice people, either."

Sean straightened his shoulders. "We'll just have to keep our eyes open for more evidence," he said.

"Fine," said Clea. "But what about all the other

stuff? We haven't actually seen anything strange since the storm wind stopped blowing ... but someone—or something—has chosen us as the messengers. And the link is still there."

"Then I suppose we're stuck with it," Philippa said.

A brief and rather uncomfortable silence followed her statement. Then Zach Yamoto looked around the table at the others, shook his long hair back out of his face, and said, "Let's not worry about what we can't help. School's over for the day, and our extra service doesn't start until tomorrow."

"So?" asked Clea.

"So the tide's out and the surfboards survived the storm. Let's go to the beach!"

Sean, Phiiippa, and Arkady exchanged glances. Sean picked up his carton of Gauguin Punch. Philippa and Arkady did the same thing a second later. The three of them got up and started to converge on Zach's chair.

"Hey, wait a minute!" said Zach. He looked from the open carton in Sean's hand to the cartons in Arkady's and Philippa's and tried to bolt-too late. Will Mornette stuck out a long leg into his path, and he collapsed laughing, onto the pavement.

Then all his friends together held him down, still laughing, for a shower bath in Gauguin Punch.